

Canine Cancer Detection Is Being Put to the Test

Cancer-sniffing dogs could be the future of noninvasive cancer screening.

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New, revolutionary studies on cancer-sniffing canines are seeking to answer one of modern cancer research's hairiest questions: Could dogs be the future of noninvasive cancer screening? [A recent report](#) by The Telegraph reviews one research group's latest plan to put canine cancer detection to the test.

Following a somewhat limited 2006 study that suggested that dogs could detect cancer, the charity group Medical Detection Dogs (MDD) has organized the studies in order to determine whether bio-detection dogs can indeed sniff out cancer in breath, urine and other samples. In its latest round of research, the group will set out to see just how effective canines can be in real-world clinical settings. MDD is working with five university hospitals in the United Kingdom to test its hypothesis.

For one National Health Service-approved study, researchers at Milton Keynes University Hospitals are hoping to develop a reliable and affordable test to detect aggressive prostate cancers in its earliest stages using dogs. Another study by MDD in collaboration with Bedford University will seek to identify the volatile organic compounds associated with cancerous tumors to establish exactly what cancer-sniffing dogs actually smell.

Another set of studies with the Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals will use 2,000 urine and stool samples from both healthy volunteers and patients diagnosed with cancer in the first-ever dog-related colorectal cancer trial. In non-cancer-related trials, Durham University is also collaborating with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Medical Research Council Unit The Gambia on a project using bio-detection dogs to identify people with malaria parasites.

"When it comes to the earliest, least invasive, most precise cancer detection, the ability of the humblest trained canine far surpasses our best analytical laboratory tests," said Andreas Mershin, PhD, a physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has developed his own electronic super nose to aid MDD in its examination of the effectiveness of cancer-detecting. "How the dogs do this — and can we train machine scent detectors to do the same or better — are the questions we will be addressing during our collaboration."

If all goes according to plan, MDD researchers say there is a good chance that humans may one day be able to simply breathe into a tube or provide a urine sample to determine their risk for cancer. Meanwhile, dogs or technologies based on their biology could replace mammograms, scans, biopsies and other invasive screening methods—a major leap forward for both man and beast.

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