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Therapy dogs' salivary cortisol levels vary during animal-assisted interventions

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Abstract

Beneficial effects of human-animal contact on human health have contributed to the wide distribution of animal-assisted interventions (AAs). While considerable effort has been devoted to the study of human welfare during AAs, potential effects on therapy animals have been addressed less frequently. The aim of this study was to determine baseline and work-related levels of cortisol, a glucocorticoid hormone that mediates physiological responses to arousal, in certified therapy dogs and therapy dogs in training. All dogs (n = 21) participated in weekly group-AAs in adult mental healthcare. Saliva samples were collected over the course of AAs and on non-working days and analysed with a cortisol enzyme immunoassay. Analysis of the results revealed that according to their cortisol responses, both therapy dogs and therapy dogs in training were not stressed by AAs. However, cortisol levels during work in certified therapy dogs performing AAs on- and off-lead varied significantly, suggesting that further investigation into the use of a lead or other methods of giving therapy dogs opportunities to approach or avoid human contact is needed.

Keywords: animal-assisted interventions, animal welfare, cortisol, dogs, lead, therapy