



THE DANGERS OF “TRAINING” COLLARS

Punishment-Based Collars Can Cause
More Problems Than They Solve

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“Training” collars, like prong collars, electronic collars, and choke chains offer the allure of a quick fix. Your dog is pulling and a prong, choke, or shock collar stops or reduces this. The trouble is, while you may have temporarily solved the problem (which will likely resume as soon as the prong/choke collar is taken off), you risk creating other problems, often much worse.

How they work

These types of aversive collars are designed to reduce undesired behavior by producing an unpleasant sensation, such as a pinch on the neck or a shock, when the animal exhibits the undesired behavior (such as pulling on leash). The idea is that the animal works to avoid the unpleasant sensation and stops exhibiting the unwanted behavior.

Potential Problems

Emotional pain

One problem with aversive tools like these is the emotional fallout they can cause. Aversives can lead to mistrust, misunderstanding, and even aggression. A dog trying to interact with other dogs in a friendly manner (often pulling on their leash) will instead be met with pain from the prong collar. They could easily associate the pain with the sight or interaction with another dog, possibly creating aggression towards that dog or even all dogs.

Physical pain

Aversive collars can cause physical pain. Choke collars put dogs at risk for damage to the esophagus or trachea. Prong collars can scratch or puncture the skin around dogs' necks. Electronic collars can cause damage ranging from redness and irritation to infection and tissue death, depending on the tightness of the collar and duration of wearing. Dogs are resilient animals and can build up resistance to the shock or the pain of a pinch/choke collar, making them ineffective.

Doesn't teach the dog what to do

Aversive collars focus on stopping behavior, rather than on teaching the animal what to do instead. The dog learns “Ouch, that hurts when I pull! But I don't know what you want me to DO. Should I stop moving altogether and just sit here instead?”

An enjoyable walk can quickly become an anxiety-ridden outing as the more the dog receives a painful sensation, the more he starts to distrust his surroundings. “What caused that pain? Was it moving? Was it walking? Was it that dog that I saw while I was pulling? Was it my owner?”

Watch for subtle signs of stress

While the dog may outwardly appear to be “doing better”: (e.g., pulling less), watch for more subtle signs that he is stressed, such as yawning, lip licking, dilated pupils, blinking, sneezing, turning away, panting rapidly, tucking his tail, laying his ears back, scratching his neck or shoulders, and “drying off” when he is not wet. These are all signs of a stressed dog.

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Alternative solutions

Positive training

Rewarding the dog with delicious food treats when he is at your side, and not pulling on leash, is the most effective way to reduce the pulling behavior. You will notice that the more often you pay the dog for walking nicely at your side, the faster the pulling goes away. The goal is to make it more interesting to pay attention to you than to pull. Remember, you are competing with some very interesting smells, so using delicious, soft, strong-smelling treats such as liver, hot dogs, or deli meat is key. Using a device such as a clicker to “mark” the dog when he is walking next to you and not pulling, then immediately following that marker with a treat will speed up the learning process even more. See our handout on positive training for more information.

Management tools

There are some great management solutions on the market that do not cause dogs pain and can help in reducing leash pulling and other unwanted behaviors. These tools are not a substitute for positive reinforcement training, and should be used in conjunction with it, working towards eliminating leash pulling.

Head collars

Similar to a halter on a horse, head collars are a humane way to give you a lot more control over your dog, especially if you cannot physically handle him. If you have control over the dog’s head, the rest of the body will follow. Always combine head collars with positive training.

Caution with head collars: They should always be paired with high-value treats and be introduced gradually so the dog acclimates to wearing them. Putting the head collar on your dog without first associating it with something good is likely to yield a dog who constantly paws at the head collar, trying to remove it. You can prevent this by pairing it every time with delicious treats. See our handout on muzzle training for more tips

No-pull harnesses

Front clip harnesses, where the leash clips to the harness in the front across the dog’s chest, rather than on top of the back, are also a great and humane choice. They don’t give you quite as much control as a head collar, but tend to be more quickly accepted by dogs without doing much “prep work.” Again, they should be combined with positive training.