

Dog Collars 101

By Vicki Stafford

Dog collars come in a variety of styles but not all collars are healthy or safe for all dogs. Choosing the right collar for your dog comes down to a little research about collars based on your dog's behaviour, breed, lifestyle and age. Collars can either be a lifesaver or can cause severe damage or even death if not used or applied properly. There are pros and cons for every type as no matter what type of collar you use, any piece of equipment that is used improperly can cause mental and physical damage. Various studies have been conducted about the damage that can be done just by pulling on a collar. Even though you can take the utmost safety and caution with any of these tools, accidents can and do happen. Here is some information about the different types of collars out there.

FLAT BUCKLE or Rolled COLLARS — This is the most common and popular type of collar. They come in many attractive collars and prints that allow you to deck your dog out in style. This collar type allows you to easily apply identification tags and leash up quickly for that walk your dog so loves to go on. They are also quick and easy to put on or take off. The down side to this style of collar is that dogs in play can become entangled, panic and twist, which could result in choking the other dog. Although some people forgo any collar at all and use it only during a walk, it is preferable that your dog wear some clear means of identification.

HEAD HALTERS or HALTIES — This particular collar is more like a horse halter, only for your dog! -Your dog needs to be desensitized to it and you shouldn't just put it on your dog and expect him to be happy about it — so training does take a little longer. Some trainers say that this shouldn't be used as an option and the dog should be taught properly how to walk on a leash from the beginning. True. But I'm one of those that tread in the grey and say "use it as a tool and temporary means or as you see fit." Seniors or people with physical disabilities may find using a head halter easier if they don't have the ability to use and apply a regular collar effectively. This is a good alternative for dogs that are reactive in certain situations as the handler can easily redirect the dog's head and remove them from the situation with little effort. Because where the head goes, the body will follow!

MARTINGALE OR NONSLIP COLLARS — Martingale collars look like a flat buckle collar but have a small chain or extra webbing at the top of them. When fitted properly, a dog is unable to pull back and slip out of his collar. You attach the leash to the loop in the chain but it does not tighten up like a choke chain, it only goes so far. In "Modern Training" this is the preferred collar to use while training your pet especially if the dog is young and has not learned to walk on a leash. This prevents a dog from pulling back as they like to do when first learning what the leash and collar is all about.

THE HARNESS — The harness is like a collar but it goes around the chest and back area. It's an alternative to around the neck collars and is highly recommend for small breeds and dogs with flat faces. There are several different types of harness on the market. -If you talk to sled dog mushers, they will tell you that the harnesses where the leash attaches to a loop on the back are the best because they allow the best pulling ability. That's great if you want to teach your dog to pull! However, several experts in the dog training field will tell you a harness with a front clip on it is much better as when the dog starts to move too far ahead of you it automatically redirects the dog back to your side. Careful consideration should be given to how the harness is fitted to ensure that it does not hinder the dog's natural gate or mobility.

CHOKER CHAINS — Due to the changing face of training that is moving towards positive methods, choke chains are slowly becoming a thing of the past. Although still widely used today, it requires a great deal of skill in order for this collar to be effective for training. Choke chains should not be used on certain breeds, especially ones with the flat faces, bulging eyes, or small necks. These types of collars require a strong correction at first to stop the dog doing what you don't want him to do. Later on in training, less or lighter corrections are needed. If you choose to use a choke chain, it is advisable to consult with someone who is knowledgeable about the use of choke chains and the correct length you need to apply the correction. Most people do not put the choke chain on properly to begin with. It needs to form a "P" with the lower part of the "P" being on the same side as the handler.

PINCH COLLARS — Pinch collars are another traditionally used piece of equipment that is similar to the choke chain but doesn't require as much strength to induce a correction. These types of collars can also be referred to as Prong Collars as they have metal spikes that stick out from the chain itself. It is sometimes thought of as safer than a choke chain because the owner tends to just let the dog pull which causes discomfort and the dog corrects itself to relieve the pain. This type of collar (as well as choke chains) is not good to use if, for example, you have a dog that is leash reactive, fear aggressive or dog-to-dog aggressive. The pain that is caused from the correction could create an association with the other dog (or other trigger) thus creating more fear and anxiety behaviours.

E-COLLARS or Electric COLLARS — This highly controversial piece of equipment often causes quite the buzz on training boards and amongst trainers themselves. Some say it's an end to a means and some say it's just downright mean. It is known through scientific studies that shock collars can actually increase anxiety and create more behaviour problems than you started with. If the handler's timing is off and they set the collar off at the wrong time, the dog may have been standing there minding his own business and get zapped just for doing what he normally does. This can cause increased anxiety in the dog as he never knows when it is going to go off and he is just waiting for it to happen. Or the case of dog-to-dog, people-to-dog, or fear aggression, all known as triggers, the dog learns to associate the trigger with the shock of the collar which only makes matters worse. However, some people report that they see significant improvement with dogs that have the boundary type collars on and say the dog never leaves the yard...that is until the owner forgets to check the batteries and Fido goes on a walk about. I have personally seen more unfavorable results from these types of collars than I have seen good.

And that's it, your crash course on canine collars. As owners, we all have responsibilities when it comes to our pets and choosing the right collar is one of them. We have to keep in mind that no one collar is right for every situation and that they should be regarded as tools or equipment. Bottom line, consider what you need the collar to do, enlist the help of someone who is knowledgeable about the equipment, and make sure it's the right fit for you... I mean your dog!

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