

BOUND ANGELS

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Choosing a Collar for your Dog

Choosing the proper collar for your dog is an area where people are very divided. The primary reason for this division is a simple lack of understanding and the all-to-common humanization of the dog. To start with, we should understand that the neck of the dog is the place that the dog is used to, through instinct, feeling and getting corrections. As a young puppy, his mom picks him up by the scruff of his neck and moves him, carries him, pulls him away from bad places and the neck is also the place that he is controlled if he gets out of line. Dogs roll onto their backs and expose their necks when they give up in a fight or play fight. Therefore, using the neck as an attachment point of a leash / collar and giving the dog direction from there is not a cruel thing to do... unless of course you don't follow some simple common sense.

The types of collars:

1. Flat collars
2. Choke chains / choke collars
3. Prong / pinch collars
4. Remote / electric collars
5. Gentle leaders / haltis
6. Harnesses ** not a collar, but listed for explanation

Before I delve into the concept and explanation of collars, I want to explain that a dog that creates tension in the lead (that is the leash) is unhappy no matter what collar he is on, and one who will eventually make an unhappy human. Dogs, properly trained, will walk on a loose leash and enjoy the walk at the pace of his human. It makes no difference if you are using a flat collar, a choke or a prong, they all cause discomfort to your dog, and inevitably to you if your dog is pulling you down the street.

Flat Collars: These types of collars are static, which is, they do not constrict when pulled. The term flat does not refer to the shape but rather the application of the collar. They are generally a buckled type collar that is fixed onto the neck of the dog with approximately 2 fingers of play between the dog's neck and the inside of the collar. This is a standard that is used in most collars. Flat collars are the norm for most people and their dogs. They look good and are most readily available. They are made from a variety of fabrics from leather to plastic to cloth.

Pro:

- Readily available in a variety of materials, shapes, colors and sizes.
- Clean, good looking style.

Con:

- Not highly useful for corrections.
- Escape risk, dog may easily slip out of this collar when pulling backwards.

Choke Collars: Choke collars are often associated, as are prong collars, with over corrections and cruelty. However, properly used they are very compassionate to the dog and will give him more freedom than other collars. There are a variety of these type of collars available ranging from thin links, long links (often referred to as fur savers), links interwoven with chord, or plain rope. These collars are inexpensive and readily available and easy to use (although often used incorrectly). The biggest issue I have with these collars is that the constant clicking of the links when pulling and releasing, causes stress on the dog's neck. And, as some studies have shown, there is a minor to severe risk of nerve damage to a dog's neck. This is the reason I do not use long-linked choke collars.

Pro:

- Easy to control the dog.
- Safety factor, as few dogs will ever pull out of choke collars.
- Readily available.
- Totally adjustable.

Con:

- Improperly used, it can choke the dog unnecessarily.
- Thick link style may cause nerve damage.
- Noisy.
- May tarnish lighter colored fur.
- Some people have stated that smaller dogs may hang themselves on choke collars.

Martingale type Collars: Martingale collars have become very popular over the last few years with family pet owners and for good reason: They allow a fair control over the dog and protects him from slipping out of his collar, yet there is almost no risk of injury if used properly. The dog cannot be choked and the dog doesn't run the risk of a crushed trachea if a correction is too severe. I think for 90% of pet dog owners, these are the best choice.

Pro:

- Easy to control dog
- Safe to the dog's physical body
- Readily available

Con:

- Not strong enough for very powerful dogs

Prong / Pinch collars: Many people cringe when they see a dog wearing a prong collar. They think the dog looks mean and the owner looks even meaner. People have a misconception that these “spikes” puncture the dog’s neck and can puncture the dog’s trachea or throat. These collars are primarily similar looking, and come in two varieties: the standard and the quick release. The collar originated in Germany and the best ones still come from there. The collar is not designed to be worn loosely; instead it should fit snugly under the dog’s chin and just behind his ears. *A DOG SHOULD NEVER BE ALLOWED TO KEEP TENSION IN THE PRONG COLLAR from the leash.* It is also a good idea to use a backup collar when using a prong collar, as these (prong) collars have a tendency to break apart when delivering a correction.

Pro:

- Easy and fair for correction (when properly used).
- Quickly delivers correction and quickly releases.

Con:

- The regular style is a bit intimidating to put on the dog. Quick release is easier.
- Looks brutal to the common observer.
- Some dogs may go into high drive mode with improperly delivered corrections wearing a prong collar.
- Improper correction may cause a dog to crash in drive and make further training impossible.
- Can break apart and the dog could break free (always use a backup collar when using a prong collar).

** It is also an important aspect to mention here that there are two ways to use a prong collar: One is by using the live ring and the other is by using the dead ring. In a nutshell, the live ring is hooking your lead up to the single ring that allows the collar to function as a choke. The dead ring is hooking your lead to both rings and therefore delivering the correction much faster. I would suggest anyone unfamiliar with a prong collar to seek out the help of a professional before using it on their dog. And, a most important note is that the dog should have the collar on for quite some time before they are ever given a correction on it. ***Only an inexperienced handler would slap a prong collar on a dog and start jerking the dog around. Avoid inexperienced trainers, as they are worse than no trainer at all.***

Remote / Electric Collars: Properly used these collars are safe and fair to the dog. Again, I stress the words *Properly Used*. These collars have come a long way from the old “Shock Collars.” Modern remote collars are highly adjustable in levels of stimulation ranging from a slight buzz to a powerful correction. They deliver a very short correction (a split second) and immediately release. The better quality collars have numerous safety features built into them to benefit the dog and the handler. They are best used with a long line so that the dog will not bolt when the correction is first delivered. An important thing to remember with these collars is that the good ones are worth their weight in gold, and the bad ones are absolutely useless and also quite dangerous. If you are going to use a remote collar, I would suggest two things: One, get some training so you know the proper way to

use this tool, and Two, most importantly, get the best quality remote collar available. Do not train your dog on a cheap remote collar; it will be a huge mistake.

Pro:

- Instant correction
- Highly adjustable
- Safe for your dog
- Dogs respond instantly to correction
- No physical exertion from human is necessary – therefore there is no emotion in the correction

Con:

- Expensive
- Not easily available at local pet stores
- A slight learning curve for the human

Gentle leaders / Haltis: These are the newer tools on the market and many trainers swear by them. These collars are placed over the dog's head, connected together and it "leads" the dog by a buckle that is on the side of the "collar." Trainers who believe in these collars equate them to the harness that a horse uses, they also claim they are very kind to the dog. I have had experience with these collars, none of which has been good up to this point. I find most dogs are totally uncomfortable getting into them, wearing them and getting corrected by them. The trainers that I've seen use them are unfamiliar with a dog's behavior or how to properly interact with a dog that is in any sort of drive. When a dog, wearing one of these collars, goes into drive they will get overly anxious and fight to try to get the collar off. I am not a fan of these "collars."

Pro:

- People claim that the dog is easier controlled when wearing them.

Con:

- Difficult to get onto and off of the dog.
- Pulls the dog from the front of the head (a weaker area), rather than from the neck.
- Looks like a muzzle
- Does not agree with many dogs, irritates some dogs.
- Not useful to control a dog if they go into drive.
- Can cause severe damage to a dog's neck if the correction is too strong.

Harnesses: Again, as stated previously, these are not collars, but I am addressing them here as many people use them in place of collars. Before I give my opinion as to why I don't like harnesses, I would like to give them a fair shake. Harnesses are useful on some breeds of dog for walking and companionship. Often times very frail dogs can benefit from a harness if they do not have a high level of drive, as can slow moving dogs such as Bassett Hounds, and such. Other than that, harnesses have two good uses: One is pulling, such as sled dogs which is the single best use for a harness, the other one is to train a dog to pull, such as agitation harnesses used in dog sport work. The bottom line is that harnesses are a solid tool for getting a dog to pull. Placing a strong breed dog such as a shepherd, or a bully-breed on a harness is about the dumbest thing I've ever seen. I won't need to list the pro's or con's on harnesses as I believe I've addressed them above.

In closing it is important to note that a collar is a tool, not the end all solution. For a dog to respond properly on a collar / leash, there is a lot of work that precedes it. There are trainers who will put a collar on a dog and start pulling him around until he conforms. It is my belief that the most important thing in training the dog is the make sure that he "wants" to be with you before you "make" him be with you. I am not against corrections in dog training, but they are just that, corrections. To be a correction, the dog should be aware what he is doing wrong. If a dog doesn't know what you expect of him, correcting him will only serve to frustrate him further. And frustration is not a good way to train a dog.

Dog training has inherent risks. I urge you to research and consult a professional for training advice.

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