



Whole Dog Journal™

The Safest Types of Dog Collars (and the Most Dangerous)

You may not be aware of the many kinds of dog collars and harnesses available today - harnesses designed for leash-pullers, and collars for escapers - which comply with positive training methods and are not abrasive to dogs.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

What type of collar should your dog wear? It depends on your dog, your personal taste, and your training goals, philosophies, and needs. But from our force-free perspective, there are some types of collars we wholeheartedly endorse, some we support with caution, and some that we regard as unnecessary and risky.

The Most Dangerous Dog Collars

Let's get these out of the way first. We recommend that you never use collars that are designed to work through the application of pain, discomfort, or aversive sensations, including:

- [Choke chains \(/issues/6_5/features/Common-Hazards-to-Dogs_5541-1.html\)](/issues/6_5/features/Common-Hazards-to-Dogs_5541-1.html)
- Prong collars
- [Shock collars \(/issues/6_2/features/Electric-Dog-Fence-Safety_5519-1.html\)](/issues/6_2/features/Electric-Dog-Fence-Safety_5519-1.html) (training or no-bark)
- Citronella spray collars
- Any other collar designed to force compliance.

There are numerous current marketing attempts to make these collars more palatable to the public, including attractive, colorful cloth covers for prong collars, rubber tips for the prongs, and euphemisms for shock that range for “stim” and “tickle” to “e-collar” and “e-touch.”

In fact, shock-collar sales reps are quite skilled at convincing their clients that the application of an electrical stimulation doesn't really hurt, while old-fashioned trainers are equally skilled at convincing these clients that the use of force is necessary to train a dog properly. Don't be fooled. Shock hurts. And recent studies overwhelmingly support the position that, while old-fashioned, force-based training methods can work, they also come with a significant risk of causing injury ([choke chains are known to damage canine tracheas \(/issues/19_1/features/Best-Puppy-Collars_21378-1.html\)](/issues/19_1/features/Best-Puppy-Collars_21378-1.html)) and

creating behavioral problems, especially fear and aggression. These tools and the old-fashioned ways they are typically used often result in shutting dogs down – not something we want to see in our dogs. In contrast, we value confident dogs who are willing to offer behavior, something that many dogs who have been trained with behavior-suppressing methods don't often do.



We don't recommend ever using choke chains; in our opinion, dogs can be better trained to not pull without using pain. That said, properly fit and used with good timing and good judgment, choke chains cause enough pain to teach a dog not to pull – but very few people seem to have the skill or knowledge needed in order to use them effectively. As a result, many dogs learn to pull right through the discomfort.

The bottom line with all these collars is that they work because they hurt or intimidate your dog – not a good training philosophy.

Dog Collars for Special Situations: Not for Every Dog

Then there are the products we would support the use of, in just the right situation, and in the right hands.

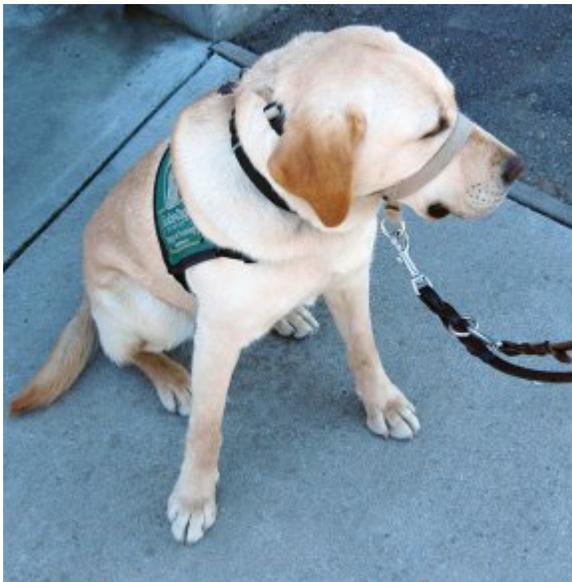
Head Halters or Head Collars

While there are many different varieties and brands of head collars, they all function by moving the point of attachment from the dog's neck to the dog's head. This gives the handler greater physical control of the dog's head – and where the head goes, the body follows. A dog who is accustomed to pulling hard on leash with a conventional collar will find that he cannot easily pull while wearing a head collar.

Our first reservation about these collars is that many dogs (perhaps even the majority) find them mildly to extremely aversive. While they look kinder to us than prong and shock collars, if they are aversive to the dog, they are not a force-free training tool.

That said, if the handler takes enough time to properly condition a dog to a head collar, some dogs learn to accept the collars and seem reasonably comfortable with them. Other dogs dislike head halters no matter how much conditioning is done. You can see dogs who have worn these for years but still try to rub them off every chance they get.

Another concern about head halters is that they tend to shut down behavior, so you may think you're seeing a behavior change when, in fact, the dog is so stressed by the head collar that he stops offering unwanted behaviors. In other words, the discomfort of the collar just suppresses the behaviors you don't like; he hasn't learned to exhibit the behaviors you enjoy more in order to earn rewards from you. If you try this collar with your dog, be prepared to discover that your dog is one of the many for whom it is not appropriate because it is aversive.



Head halters can be useful tools, offering smaller or frail owners much-needed leverage to ensure control of a big dog who suddenly forgot his manners and started pulling. But many dogs find wearing them highly aversive, and many owners misuse them.

Our final reservation has to do with the fact that this tool can be used to severely injure a dog if used improperly. **A handler must never yank or pull hard on the leash, or allow the dog to hit the end of the leash with force when it's attached to a head halter.** Doing so can badly injure the dog's neck or even paralyze him. It's critical that handlers are taught how to use this tool properly: gently and with great awareness.

Slip Lead / Show Lead / Loop Lead

These are collars of convenience, often used by animal shelters and rescues, but also often in conformation showing. A slip lead is actually a leash/collar combination, made of a length of nylon or leather with a handle at one end and a ring at the other. The leash is pulled through the ring to form a slip collar at one end. This means that, like a choke chain, the collar part can tighten without limit, so there is potential for choking the dog.

Because dogs in shelters often must be moved quickly without time for collar fitting, this can be an acceptable brief use. (A product with all the convenience and less risk than the slip lead is the martingale variety of the show lead, which can tighten only to a specified point; martingale collars are covered below). If shelter dogs are to be taken for "real" walks, more appropriate equipment, such as flat collars or front-clip harnesses, should be used.

Show dogs are presumably trained to walk with their handlers, so while those collars sometimes look tight around a dog's neck, it's unlikely the dog is pulling on them the way an untrained dog might on a choke chain.

The slip leads used in shelters and rescues are generally workmanlike and made of sturdy nylon. In contrast, the ones used in shows are usually made with lightweight leather, nylon, or a thin chain. However, the function is the same, and they all have some potential to choke and cause trachea damage if a dog pulls hard and persistently, or if the handler jerks on them, in a way that they were not intended to be used.

***Whole Dog Journal's* Favorite Dog Collars**

Without getting name-brand specific, here are the types of collars we do like – and why.

Flat Collar

Your basic flat collar offers you many choices: leather, nylon, cloth; in solid colors, patterns, floral, embroidered, holiday-themed, bejeweled, reflective, glowing, padded; and with buckle or snap fasteners. You can even order collars embroidered with your phone number, in case your dog goes astray, and others with bow ties for “formal” occasions. A properly fitted flat collar allows you to slip two fingers under the collar (perpendicular to the dog’s neck).

The flat collar is great for everyday use, such as holding ID tags and perhaps for general walking and training purposes. If your dog is a dedicated puller, however, a front-clip control harness is a better choice for walks and training, [until she learns how reinforcing it is to stay close to you \(/issues/20_3/features/Train-Your-Dog-to-Check-In_21611-1.html\)](/issues/20_3/features/Train-Your-Dog-to-Check-In_21611-1.html).

See the ["2018 Best Dog Harnesses Review \(/issues/20_4/features/Best-Dog-Harnesses-2017_21622-1.html\)"](/issues/20_4/features/Best-Dog-Harnesses-2017_21622-1.html) for *Whole Dog Journal's* harness recommendations if you think your dog is ready for one.

Martingale Collar

Also called a [“limited slip” collar \(/issues/3_10/features/Looking-at-Dog-Collars-as-a-Restraint-Tool_5083-1.html\)](/issues/3_10/features/Looking-at-Dog-Collars-as-a-Restraint-Tool_5083-1.html), the martingale has a loop that allows the collar to tighten somewhat, but isn’t intended to choke or give “corrections.” The primary purpose of this collar is to prevent your dog from backing out of the collar, as some dogs learn to do with a flat collar. The loop allows the collar to hang comfortably until the dog pulls back, then the loop tightens just enough to keep it from sliding over the dog’s head.

Note: Because the loop can get caught on objects, this collar should only be on the dog under supervision, not left on all the time.

Martingale collars are also commonly called “Greyhound collars,” as they are frequently used with this breed, whose narrow heads make it easy for them to slip out of flat collars. However, a martingale collar can also more securely hold thick-necked dogs, such as Bulldogs, whose necks are as wide as their heads are large.

The martingale collar should be fitted so that when the dog pulls it tightens just enough to prevent the dog from backing out of it, but not so tight that it chokes or restricts breathing in any way.

Safety or Breakaway Dog Collars

This collar has a mechanism that releases under pressure, to prevent accidental hanging if it gets snagged on something, or choking when two dogs are wrestling and playing collar-grab. The double-ring feature allows you to attach a leash without triggering the breakaway function even if your dog pulls hard. This can be a very useful collar, especially if your dog plays with other dogs who like to grab collars.



KeepSafe Break-Away Safety Collar from Petsafe

The downside is, if you have to grasp the collar suddenly in an emergency, it will come open and pull free from your dog's neck. Therefore, while it can be useful, it does have limited application, and should not be used if you are in an open space where you may need to grab the collar.

Dog Collars for Unique Situations



Planet Dog Fleece-Lined Collars

Dogs who have extremely thin coats may benefit from wearing a fleece-lined collar, which won't rub their hair off like many other materials can. Our favorite fleece-lined collars come from Planet Dog (<http://planetdog.com/cozy-hemp-adjustable-collar>). Note that the fleece collars don't come in a size suitable for tiny dogs, however.

Big, strong dogs who are allowed to pull strongly on leash, such as some dogs who work in law enforcement (/issues/14_2/features/Reward-Based-Training-and-Police-Dogs_20185-1.html), tracking (/issues/13_7/features/Dog-Sports-Competitive-Tracking_20027-1.html), and personal protection, are generally fitted with extra-wide collars, which disperse the pressure over a wider area on the wearer's neck to prevent injury. Buckles on these collars are generally made with one or two metal tongues, rather than plastic or metal side-release

buckles, for greatest strength. Check out the offerings from Blocky Dogs (<http://www.blockydogs.com/cmsbd/index.php>).

It can also be difficult to find collars that fit tiny dogs well - and often, when you do find a really small collar, the ring is so tiny that it's hard to attach a leash or ID tag. We like this source for stylish small-dog collars (<https://www.upcountryinc.com/our-products/category/teacup-collars>).

Nix the jingling! We like collars that can be ordered with your contact information stitched right into the fabric, like these washable, durable bamboo collars from snazzyfido.com (<https://www.snazzyfido.com/>).



Snazzyfido.com Bamboo Collar

Avoid These Common Dog Collar Dangers

Even the best collars have the potential to cause harm to your dog if not used wisely. Here are some tips and cautions for proper, safe collar use:

1. Don't Leave Collars on Unattended Dogs

Any collar left on an unattended dog has the potential to catch on something and hang the dog. In fact, some agility and barn hunt venues don't allow dogs to wear collars while they are running the course, for fear that the collar could get caught on something. It is also possible for a dog to get her lower jaw caught in the collar.

While hanging potential is greatest with a choke collar (yes, this sadly happened to a St. Bernard of mine when I was young and too dumb to know better), it can also happen with regular flat collars. I do leave flat collars on my dogs – the tradeoff is that if you remove collars, your dog has no visible identification and may be harder to capture if she does somehow escape. You have to decide what hazard is a more likely threat to your dog's safety.

2. Don't Leave Collars on Playing Dogs

Dogs who are playing together can get tangled in each other's collars, especially if they engage in mouthy play. This, also, happened to one of my dogs: while Darby and Keli were playing, Keli got her jaw caught under Darby's collar and then spun around, twisting the collar so that Darby was being choked. Fortunately, I was able to pick up Keli and un-spin her, releasing the tension on the collar and allowing the dogs to separate. Neither dog was harmed – but it could have been significantly worse. Dogs have broken their jaws, and others have choked to death in this way.

If you feel you must leave a collar on your dog when he's playing with other dogs – say, at a dog park – make sure it has a quick-release buckle, or better yet is a safety or breakaway collar, which will release under pressure.

3. Watch Out for Tags on Collars

Dangling tags can catch on crate wires and heater vents. You can tape tags to the collar so they don't dangle, or look for a dog tag "pocket" that holds the collars flat against the collar. Slide-on ID tags are available from a variety of sources, [including this one](http://www.drsfostersmith.com/product/prod_display.cfm?pcatid=28501) (http://www.drsfostersmith.com/product/prod_display.cfm?pcatid=28501). Alternatively, you can use a collar with your number stitched on it, or use a light-weight ring for the tags that will bend and release under pressure.

Now Go Find that Perfect Dog Collar!

If you need help deciding what's best for you and your dog, find a good force-free trainer who can guide you in making collar decisions that are compatible with your training goals and philosophy.

I'm sharing a terrific quote that was passed on to me, offered by trainer Nicolas James Bishop at a recent conference of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers in Australia:

"Punishment gets compliance; reinforcement gets cooperation."

Keep this in mind as you choose your dog's collar!

Author Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, of Fairplay, Maryland, is WDJ's Training Editor. Miller is also the author of many books on positive training. Her newest is, Beware of the Dog: Positive Solutions for Aggressive Behavior in Dogs.

Read More on These Topics

- [Dog Health & Care \(/topics/dog_health_care.html\)](/topics/dog_health_care.html)
- [Dog Training & Behavior \(/topics/dog_training_behavior.html\)](/topics/dog_training_behavior.html)
- [Leash Training \(/topics/leash_training.html\)](/topics/leash_training.html)
- [Positive Training Basics \(/topics/positive_training_basics.html\)](/topics/positive_training_basics.html)

Comments (13)

My dog has been trained using an e-collar and cannot wait to have it put on when we go out walking or car rides, etc. If a person has trained with a reputable trainer, and uses the collar in the right way, there is nothing wrong with an e-collar.

Posted by: Mac's mom | December 6, 2017 3:20 PM

Our JRT cross is an escape artist and loves to follow walkers and other dogs. Our garden is impossible to secure being on a steep hillside with boggy areas that can't be fenced. An electric fence/collar was our only option after rescuing our dog from main roads and losing her for hours on end. She learned very quickly and has probably only received 3 or 4 gentle shocks ever. I tried it on myself and they really don't hurt. Now she knows her boundaries she doesn't need the collar and has complete freedom in our large garden, and we have peace of mind. She is gentle and loving and shows no aggression or fear. Used correctly, I think electric dog containment can be highly beneficial to dog and owner.

Posted by: Vivienne doglover | December 4, 2017 10:40 AM

I use the "buzz" on a training collar that gets the dogs attention! I now have to rarely use it but if I need to buzz, they quickly respond instead of jumping on another dog, aggressively, as they walk by. My Aussie does that, at times. I don't use the shock.

Posted by: wfergy | December 3, 2017 12:55 PM

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Posted by: wfergy | December 3, 2017 12:55 PM

This is a very biased article that focuses on the extremes. I have a 10 year old yellow lab who was trained using Invisible Fence. The trainer was excellent and as a result I have never experienced the negative effects that comprise most of this article. What makes a difference is good judgment and a special bond between dog and owner. I hope that you will follow up with an article that is more balanced.

Posted by: billo | December 3, 2017 12:37 PM

Typically and sadly one-sided, emotional and uninformed article. In addition, insulting to both dogs and people. There is a place in dog training for flat collars, choke chains, prong collars and e-collars. All are useful depending on the dog and the stage of training, and all can be used in a manner that produces results in the form of a better behaved and happier dog more attuned to its handler. To suggest that any instrument is in and of itself harmful -- or for that matter that any tool can have its own moral agency -- is an affront to our intelligence and leads to a more limited set of options for the range of dog and behaviors we face. It is in fact ultimately harmful to dogs. More dogs will be abandoned to shelters and to euthanasia from this sort of thinking and the practices, or restrictions on practices, it demands.

Posted by: rip | December 3, 2017 11:14 AM

I work in a retail pet food store so I get to see lots of dogs, dog collars & dog owners. Many owners have vested time & attention to training a well-behaved pet - at least when their dog is the only dog in the store. It is amazing how quickly even the sweetest treat-taking pup will turn into a resource guarder. Some dogs constantly pull. Or the owner will jerk the leash to gain compliance. Those owners never take a hint about using a harness

In the process of searching for a dog-lover gift, I discovered Pawdentity. It cuts the tag jingle and makes transfer from one collar to another simple & secure. The recipient loved it.

Posted by: Alis | November 30, 2017 9:08 AM

The phrase "force-free" as used in your article is bunk. The use of correction (especially leash correction on a contracting collar such as the Martingale of which you seem to approve) is not a method of applying coercion (force), but rather is the physical manifestation of the handler's disapproval of the dog's poor decision.

Furthermore, the caption of the photo in the article contradicts the gist of the copy. The faulty assumption under which your premise dies is that a skilled trainer cannot teach the average dog owner how to properly apply corrections in a manner that is the least invasive possible to get the dog to do or stop doing a behavior while having the most minimally aversive effect on the dog.

A good trainer can teach good owners to make good dogs...

Posted by: kidtomas | November 27, 2017 10:34 PM

For a flat buckle collar for Sporting dogs we LOVE our Dog's Unlimited Duralon collars. You can get them in many bright colors and they can come with a bolted on name plate that can include your name & phone number (whatever, up to 4 lines worth). I put "REWARD for Return" as my 4th line even though we've not yet, lost a dog. They are a coated nylon, so they can go in swimming but not stay wet, or get washed if the dog "rolls" in something. They can take the test pull of some very large (80-90-lb) bird dogs waiting on a tie-out stake to go out, at a field trial. Some of my collars have lasted more than 10 years, just moving from dog to dog.

We NEVER put rabies (or any other tags) on our dogs. We do carry the tags with us, in a dog bag. It carries: leashes, various collars, check cords, whistles, tracking lines, retrieving dummies, dumbbells, etc. and a first aid kit. I use a tote bag made by Lands's End which has a ton, of inside pockets.

Posted by: Betsy | November 27, 2017 4:54 AM

Great article.

For tags, I recommend the original maker of the flat tags aka Boomerang tags for several reasons. They are the original company to design the tags and I support their quality. I have had the tags for years and they are as legible as the day I bought them, even after washing collars weekly with towels. A client has the Foster Smith and after barely a year, it is illegible.

Boomerang Tags has OPEN-ended flat tags that you fold the collar into for attaching. That allows for fit into many more collars than those only able to slide into the slot on the ones mentioned in the article. They also make a "thicker" one with a depth that allows for the double thick collars to fit as well.

I am not a flat collar fan either except for holding the ID. Owning a pet service, no dangling tags are allowed for the reasons stated in the article.

You can get the Boomerang Tags searching that name.

Posted by: Susan@Pawsitive | November 26, 2017 1:56 PM

We have nothing like this available in Australia unfortunately – so mine have to come from the States & several friends recommended www.boomerangtags.com to me. I've had their tags for my last three dogs & have been really happy with them. The only trouble I've ever had is, living in Western Australia (WA) my tags have occasionally gone to Washington state first before making it "down under"!

Posted by: Grevillia | November 26, 2017 11:08 AM

We've used a flat collar for every dog we've had, and have never had a problem with them catching on anything or slipping off. We did take our Border Collie mix's collar off at night, mainly because of the jingling tags when she scratched. Our Lab gets uber-excited when we take his collar off, so it's easier to leave on.

Posted by: DreamWeaver | November 26, 2017 11:05 AM

I object to a flat collar being listed first on your favorite collar list.

A properly-fitted martingale provides a period of relief from any tightening at all, whereas, on most breeds, a flat collar must always be tight to avoid a dog backing out of it.

I have Shelties and with all their fur a flat collar must be tightened beyond comfort for it to be safe. A martingale works great. Never, ever left on the dogs.

Posted by: smithdogs | November 26, 2017 10:21 AM