



Humane Society of Missouri

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Collar and Harness Options for Dogs

There are many types of collars and harnesses that are used for restraining or training dogs, ranging from simple strap/buckle collars to head halters; in the case of collars and harnesses, one size (or type) does *not* fit all.

"Functionality, comfort and safety should be the prime considerations in any choice."

Functionality, comfort and safety should be the prime considerations in any choice. It is important to recognize that different designs have different purposes and control the dog in different ways. Some collars or harnesses need to be applied quite tightly, while others should be more loosely fitted. It is important to purchase the correct size for your dog, and to carefully read and follow any directions for use.

If not used appropriately, the restraint can cause serious injury or worsen behavioral problems.

The pros and cons of different devices are listed below:

Restraint	Pros	Cons
Strap/buckle collars	Inexpensive and easy to use: allows attachment of external ID device such as dog tag.	If dog pulls excessively, applies excessive pressure to neck and trachea, causing injury. If not fitted tightly enough, dog may easily slip its collar and escape.
Chain link collars or choke chains (A type of training collar)	When used correctly, they can effectively stop a dog from pulling on leash.	Easily and very frequently (routinely) misused as a choke device, e.g., wrong size or put on incorrectly so that they don't release properly when tension is removed. Can cause serious neck injury as dog surges forward. Dog should not be left with such a collar on the whole time. Unnecessary for the dog trained to walk properly on leash (heel). See our handout on 'Training Products for Dogs - To Choke or Not to Choke'
Martingale collars - a sort of hybrid between a choke and strap collar.	Originally developed for Greyhounds. It can be used effectively to train a dog to avoid pulling with less risk of damage or slipping off than a chain collar.	Although widely available, owners are often less familiar with them.
Pinch or prong collars.	Not recommended; if this degree of force and discomfort is needed to control the dog, then specialist assistance should be sought. See our handout on 'Training Products for Dogs - To Choke or Not to Choke'	

Compressed air collars (with or without spray).	Can be useful for distracting a dog, but should be used in combination with careful behavioral evaluation and advice. Remote (owner) operated and dog based control (i.e. bark activated) collars available depending on the problem.	Can be very aversive to some dogs and completely ineffectual with others. May encourage owners not to implement essential behavioral therapy. Dog may habituate to the collar so it becomes useless if use of the collar is not combined with appropriate training.
Electronic training (shock) collars	Not recommended for general use as inappropriate use can result in serious welfare problems.	
Head halters	Generally provide good control of the head although designs do vary. Most close the dog's mouth if it lunges forward, reducing the injury to people and some have a lockable strap giving even greater control. Some appear to calm the dog instantly. When compared to body harnesses, there is less risk of rubbing and development of pressure sores. Easier to control some behaviors such as lunging and pulling.	Usually involve an adjustment period for dog to accept feel of head halter. Often owners do not know how to fit them properly. Fitting instructions vary greatly with different designs and owners will may erroneously assume that if they know how to fit one design they can fit others in a similar way. If fitted poorly, collars can slip and rub the bridge of the nose. Some cause downward head movement if the dog pulls and while this stops most dogs, some can over-flex their neck if not properly managed at first. Often require a change in owner preconceptions (e.g. need to be aware that they should not correct the dog as if using a choke chain). See our handout on 'Training Dogs - Head Halter Training' for more advice.
Body harness	Takes the pressure from the leash away from the neck and throat. Designs where the leash attaches to the front of the harness on the chest are better to control pulling without pain or discomfort.	Dogs may push into the harness, making it harder to control larger or more powerful breeds. Front attachment harnesses may take more experience in fitting to function properly.
Control harness	Allow control of the body while giving the dog freedom to move. Harnesses which prevent pulling and which link onto a permanently fitted strap type collar can provide a very quick self-correcting mechanism for pulling. A front attaching body harness can serve also serve as a control harness, without causing any pain or discomfort.	Dogs can get sore around the shoulders or under their legs. Some control harnesses work by making the dog rise up on its back legs when it pulls and this can actually exacerbate some pulling problems associated with greeting people. NOTE: Some versions work on inducing abdominal discomfort by tightening around the belly and so can cause harm.