

B-27 PROTOCOL FOR CHOOSING COLLARS, HEAD COLLARS, AND HARNESES

Identification

One of the main objectives that collars accomplish is identification. All cats and dogs should be labeled. There are three main ways to do this, and they are not exclusive: (1) tags on a collar provide information about the client (name, address, and phone number), veterinarian (primarily the phone number), and vaccination status (current rabies vaccine); (2) tattoos in ears or on thighs; or (3) microchipping. Tattoos are usually comprised of the client's Social Security number (in the United States) or some code and require at least sedation to execute. The dog or cat then usually wears another tag on its collar indicating the telephone number to call should the animal be separated from its people and need to find its home. Microchipping is becoming more broadly available, but in Europe and the United Kingdom the systems are less standardized than they are in the United States. Microchips are easy to install but require the widespread availability of microchip readers. Long-term effects of an implanted, digitally coded device have not been fully evaluated, but the risks appear small in preliminary tests. The general principle behind microchips is that a number is displayed when the chip is scanned and ownership data can be obtained by calling a central depot. The animal generally but not always wears a tag that indicates that a chip has been implanted. The chips are radioopaque, meaning that they will be displayed on a radiograph or x-ray film. Whatever method is chosen, two factors should be certain: (1) the tags are current, and (2) they are on a collar that fits comfortably. The latter means that the collar is either a breakaway collar through which one or two fingers can slip comfortably or that the collar is sufficiently snug to stay on the animal if it tilts its head, but should the collar become entangled, the animal can pull its head out of the collar. If clients are not cautious about the fit of collars, animals can strangle or collars can become imbedded in their skin, resulting in morbidity or mortality. Breakaway collars are particularly important for cats, who have elevated squeezing their bodies into small places into an art form.

All animals should be labeled. If they are lost or stolen, it may be their only hope of getting home again. If the township or county in which the pet lives requires a license tag, this could be the only thing that saves the pet from impoundment, quarantine, or destruction.

Control

Collars and harnesses are used primarily for control of dogs, but a few words about harnesses and leashes for cats may be helpful.

Cats should be restrained when they go to the veterinarian and, if they are indoor cats, when they are outside. They should also be restrained in a car so that they do not become projectile. Placing them in a crate can accomplish this, but more freedom and exercise can be an excellent idea. All kittens should be fitted with a harness so that they can be encouraged to explore the world. A harness is preferable to a collar because, fitted correctly, it will not injure the cat and the cat cannot slip out of it. The younger the cat is when the client fits it with a harness, the easier it will be to accustom the cat to it. Once the harness is on the cat, it should be taken for trips in cars, on walks, and for visits to the veterinarian. These activities should occur frequently; they will pay off later when the cat needs care that requires

tractability. If the cat can safely be taken outside, the cat's life and the interaction between the cat and client will be enriched.

Buckle Collars

Buckle collars can be good to accustom young puppies or kittens to leashes but should not be relied on for control of any animal. Any animal that walks calmly and without resistance when on a leash that is attached to a buckle collar is not doing so because of the collar. These animals are exquisitely behaved despite the collar. Any animal that pulls or lunges while on a buckle collar needs another type of restraint or training device. Buckle collars—provided that they break away or can slip off, if caught—should be fitted to all animals so that tags or embroidered identification can always accompany the pet. This means that they are used in addition to, not instead of, other devices.

Choker Collars

Dogs are routinely fitted with devices such as choker collars as part of a training program. Choker collars are usually either made from chain or a rolled, braided nylon. When used correctly, choker collars are actually one of the best examples of true negative reinforcement: when the dog pulls, the collar tightens and either the sound or the pressure indicates that the dog has engaged in an undesirable behavior; when the dog stops, that pressure is released (and in the case of a chain, the sound of slippage occurs) and the dog is unimpeded. It is the release from the negative stimulus (the tightening of the collar) that is the reward. Unfortunately, most people do not use choke collars correctly; to do so requires a lot of work and patience. Instead, many dogs "choke" when chokers are used. When they are allowed to pull on the collar and permitted to sustain the pull, these dogs learn to override the choker. In doing so they are also at risk for laryngeal, esophageal, and ocular damage (damage in the blood vessels in the eye). Despite still being the preferred and, in some cases, the required form of restraint in a show ring, choke collars are an idea whose time may have passed. When clients can overcome their own misconceptions about how the collars look or what they mean, they will, with ever-increasing frequency, choose a head collar or a no-pull harness for their dog. When used correctly the devices are safer, easier to use, and help teach the dog better behaviors. They are a winning solution that could and perhaps should eclipse the choker.

Head Collars

Head collars are very much like horse halters. They act as a basket that holds the dog's cheeks and jaws and stay on the dog by fastening high on the back of the neck. Generally, at least one strap fits over the bridge of the dog's nose and one fits over the back of the neck. The leash is attached in the middle of the halter to the nose strap, but under the chin. This is how a lead is attached to a horse halter but is a major change for many people who are accustomed to attaching a leash directly to something around a dog's neck. The two major versions of the head collar are the Halti (Safari Whitco, Bohemia, NY) and the Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collar (Premier Pet Products, Richmond, VA). The Halti is intended to be fitted with a second collar because it fits loosely. It also cannot be tightened to prohibit biting by pulling forward, but it fits some very jowly breeds well and snugly. The Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collar gives most dogs a better fit, requires no second

collar, and can be used with a leash to correct inappropriate behaviors and prohibit biting.

Head collars are wonderful for most dogs. They spare the dog's larynx and esophagus and thus are an ideal choice for dogs with laryngeal damage, tracheal collapse, or cervical (neck) damage involving disks, bones, nerves, or muscles. Head collars also ride high on the back of the dog's neck so that when the leash is pulled forward or the dog pulls in the direction opposite to that of the leash, this part of the collar tightens a bit and applies a small amount of steady pressure on the area of the upper neck near the head. Not only is this generally very safe, but also this pressure uses the same kind of signal that dogs communicate to other dogs when they wish to control them or stop. Thus when the dog is corrected with a leash, the head collar communicates a "doggy" signal to the dog to stop. No translation is necessary, and the response is quick. For clients who are already working with a behavior modification program, this type of helpful, kind device can be a godsend. If the dog has a mouthing or biting problem, the Gentle Leader/Promise System Canine Head Collar can be gently pulled forward to firmly, safely, securely, and humanely close the dog's mouth. When used correctly the collar cannot injure the dog and will allow the client to control most of the dog's behaviors and stop the dog from biting.

The leverage provided by a head collar allows children and people with arthritis to walk even unruly dogs—and to enjoy it. If dogs get more exercise they are calmer; if people enjoy being with their pets more, they will be more motivated to work with them. Head collars provide a win-win situation and are increasingly becoming the collar of first choice for a puppy. They are certainly appropriate for all life stages and have another advantage over chokers: they encourage humane behavior from people. We can use all the kindness and humanity we can learn.

As is true for any device, injury can occur if these collars are used incorrectly. The most common complaint about head collars involves loose-lipped dogs that chew on their lips because the nose piece of the collar fits too tightly. Hair on the nose can also be damaged if this occurs. A good fit is important, and some practice might be needed to determine the best adjustment of the neck strap and the nose strap. Dogs fitted with head collars should be able to comfortably eat, drink, pant, and even bark and bite, if not corrected. These are not muzzles, they are not rubber bands around the dog's nose, and they are not cruel or inhumane. They are great. Now that these head collars are available in designer colors, people should accept them more readily.

No-pull Harnesses

No-pull harnesses fit under the dog's front legs and loop over the dog's shoulders so that when the dog pulls, its front legs are pulled back and it slows its pace. The two main versions of these harnesses are the Lupi (Safari Whitco, Bohemia, NY) and the Sporn or No-Pull Harness (Four Paws Products Ltd., Hauppauge, NY). The No-Pull harness has a special collar that is sewn with two different-sized metal tabs. The loose, leashlike part of the harness fits through one of the loops, under and around the legs, and is attached to the other loops, under the neck, with a clasp. The leash is then attached to the loose part of the harness over the dog's back. The back part of the harness can be tightened for a better, more responsive, fit. The Lupi does not use any clasps or tabs but relies on a system of concentric loops that are fitted around the dog's front legs and over its back. The leash is then af-

fixed to the back portion, which slips to tighten if the dog pulls. The Lupi is easier to fit to very hairy dogs or for people whose hands are very arthritic. Both of these fitting patterns sound complex and like topological puzzles. They are not. Once clients have the devices in their hands, the fit becomes self-explanatory.

Such harnesses are wonderful for dogs that pull or lunge. These are not appropriate devices to fit to dogs whose biggest problem is biting because they do not control the dog's mouth or head. Furthermore, reaching around the dog's head and neck to fit these harnesses could be dangerous if the dog is aggressive to people.

When fitted correctly these harnesses easily allow children or people with arthritis to pleasantly and calmly walk their dogs. These harnesses, like head collars, spare the dog's neck so that dogs, even if they have laryngeal, tracheal, esophageal, or spinal problems, can be safely exercised.

Caution is urged against fitting no-pull harnesses too tightly; too tight a fit could impede circulation in the dog's front legs. Fortunately, this is difficult to accomplish.

Harnesses

Regular harnesses fit around the dog's chest and avoid any pressure on the neck when the leash is pulled. They are devices used solely to attach the dog to the leash and offer no chance for correction of undesirable behaviors. Many dogs do not pull or lunge when walked and just need to be protected from the world and to comply with leash laws. Regular harnesses are fine for such dogs. They also work well for small dogs that perform undesirable leash behaviors but are too small to cause what the client would consider to be a problem. In fact, some of the harnesses for smaller dogs have built-in "handles" so that the dog can be picked up by the client if the dog must be removed from a situation or placed in a car. These harnesses are not good choices for large dogs that are not absolutely perfectly behaved because they provide the client with little control. In fact, big, highly motivated dogs are able to use the harness to push into the situation from which their people are trying to drag them because their shoulders are unrestrained. Clients often choose harnesses because they want to protect the dog's neck. This is a good idea, but head collars and no-pull harnesses are a better solution.

Prong or Pinch Collars

Prong collars are subject to all of the same criticisms as are chokers. Furthermore, they can seriously damage the dog's neck because they can become imbedded in the skin if the dog learns to override them. Most dogs learn to override these collars, and people who use them often voluntarily comment that they need to use some degree of pain to control their animals under some circumstances. These collars are intended to use pain to encourage the dog to attend to the person. For aggressive dogs this response can worsen their aggression, and for dominantly aggressive dogs this response may not only worsen their aggression, but may also endanger the client. If people understood more about how dogs communicate and how these collars work, they would appreciate that responses other than pain are more desirable for changing an animal's behavior. These collars are no substitute for early intervention and the treatment of problem behaviors. Every situation that clients claim is controlled by the use of such a collar can be better, more safely, and more humanely treated with a head collar and some time investment.

Some dogs are fitted with prong collars because they make the dog look "tough." The problem here does not lie with the dog.

Shock Collars

No dog should wear a shock collar to correct an inappropriate behavior except on the qualified recommendation of a specialist in behavioral medicine. This is almost akin to saying no dog should wear a shock collar. Certainly, no client should self-prescribe a shock collar for a dog to control an unruly or aggressive behavior. Given the correct motivational and timing circumstances and the appropriate level of shock, dogs (and humans) can learn from the application of a painful shock. However, the application of shock (and shock collars are intended to be painful) is an absolutely inappro-

priate treatment for aggression and fear. The use of shock collars invariably makes such behaviors worse, renders the dog less predictable, and potentially endangers the client. Most people who use shock collars either want a "quick fix" or need to absolutely control the dog. The former approach does not work for dogs with problem behaviors, and the latter may be problematic in itself. There are some rare exceptions when shock collars can be used rationally to change or shape a dog's behavior. Under these conditions very few (one to three) shocks are usually sufficient to cause the change. If clients who use a shock collar find that they have to, or do, shock the dog more frequently, there is a problem that the collar cannot address. Such clients should seek professional help from a specialist in behavioral medicine immediately.