

Collar or Harness for Your Dog?

Our topics for this week are:

- **Types of dog collars**
- **Types of dog harnesses**
- **Is a collar or harness best for your dog?**

Training dogs requires a means to apply a leash. A slip leash made from the leash itself can suffice during training periods. Collars and harnesses allow for attachment of identification tags and temporary grips when handling dogs without a leash. Neither should be left on an unattended puppy since they can get caught on objects and result in injury to puppies. Selection of either a collar or a harness and the correct type for your dog is important for their safety, regardless of your dog's age.

Flat and Rolled (Fixed Buckle) Collars

Flat fabric or flat or rolled leather collars with a buckle or plastic snap closure is used for identification purposes and routine restraint of puppies or sensitive small dogs. Collars should allow 2 fingers to be easily slipped underneath or the collar is too tight.

Woven synthetic flat collars are inexpensive, come in a variety of colors, are cool in hot weather, and often have plastic snap closures. The fabric frequently catches on the dog's haircoat causing an itchy sensation to the dog.

Flat or rolled leather collars are more expensive, flat collars can be warm in hot weather, flat and rolled leather collars come in different shades of brown or black, and have metal buckles and ID tag rings. Leather does not catch the haircoat and is more easily grasped when handling without a leash. Ginger does not routinely wear a collar, but when she does, it is a rolled leather collar.

Leashes should not be attached to flat or rolled collars for reliable restraint. Even if the collar is properly fitted, the dog may be able to back up, shake its head, and escape. Conversely, puppies grow quickly, so collars can become too tight in a short time. The tightness of a collar must be checked frequently in growing puppies.

Pressing on the lower aspect of the neck can induce coughing and could exacerbate the collapse of an abnormal tracheal ring. Collars should be avoided in dogs with respiratory problems.

Choke (Attention) Chain Collars

Choke chain collars are similar to slip leashes. The term “choke” is a misnomer since the goal is not to choke the dog. A choke chain tightens quickly around the neck and releases quickly when tension is released on an attached leash. A more accurate name would have been an attention chain. Pulls should be to the side and not upwards which can cause excessive compression around the neck. For the handler to be on the right side of the dog’s body, the collar’s loop should go clockwise around the dog’s neck. If applied counter clockwise, the loop will not fully release when tension is removed on the attached leash.

Dogs must continually walk on the same, traditionally left, side of the handler. The chain will not be oriented correctly when on the other side of the handler. Choke collars should only be used for training purposes and when the dog is on a hand-held leash. Otherwise, there is risk of strangulation if tied or if the collar becomes caught on an object.

Choke collars, as with any restraint equipment, can be misused and cause aversive behaviors. Unlike shock collars, choke collars are training tools that can deliver attention-to-the-handler getting signals appropriate to situations that may quickly vary. They are not intended to cause injury or pain. Used with proper discretion and timing, a choke collar can be a safe, useful communication tool between handlers and dogs and will not cause aversive behaviors.

Martingale and Prong Collars

Martingale collars are flat collars with rings at both ends and a chain that goes through each ring. The chain also has rings at each end. The size of the flat collar can be adjusted in size so that the extent of squeeze on the neck, when the leash is pulled, can be modified. Unlike choke collars, martingale collars cannot be put on backwards and will work the same if the dog changes from one side of the handler to the other. Since they are flat collars and the pressure delivered to the dog’s neck from tension on the leash is less than a choke collar, martingale collars can be more easily ignored than choke collars by inattentive dogs.

Thick-haired dogs may have sufficient hair padding on their neck to ignore the pressure of a basic martingale collar. Blunted prongs can produce better responsiveness without causing injury.

Martingale collars are also called “limited slip collars” because they are less likely to slip off if the dog pulls back on the collar and leash. For this reason, they are often used on sight hounds, such as Afghans, which have narrow heads.

Safety Collars

Safety collars have a breakaway fastener if the collar becomes caught on an object. A leash should not be used with a safety collar, which makes their usefulness questionable, at best.

Chest Harness

Chest harnesses cannot strangle dogs. They will not aggravate or cause respiratory difficulties and will not slip off if the dog pulls backward on a leash. All dogs without advanced leash or voice command training taken outside a building or security enclosure and all dogs being transported by car should have a harness with attached leash on to prevent escape or strangulation if they escape.

In general, harnesses are used on small dogs since large dogs can easily pull a handler. Harnesses usually have a metal ring for attachment of a leash on the top of the dog's back. To reduce a dog's pulling power with a harness, some harnesses have a leash attachment ring on the front of the dog's chest. There is some risk of injury to a dog with repeated use of a front-clip harness since it forces an repeated abnormal gait.

Vicious dogs may be more easily handled and tractable by wearing both a harness and collar with a leash that cannot be chewed in two (chain or heavy wire). Upon return of the dog to a cage, the harness is removed first and the collar and leash is removed during the dog's return to its cage.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Flat collars are best used for identification purposes.**
- 2. Harnesses are best used on dogs with respiratory problems or for preventing escapes while on a leash.**
- 3. Attention collars (often called "choke collars" should only be worn while a dog is being trained.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.

