

The Collar's Role: Avoiding Spine, Neck, and Other Injuries

Does your dog pull or even lunge as you walk down the street? Even if your dog pulls only on occasion, this article will help your dog live a happier and healthier life with you. Many different types of collars are available for your canine companion. For some, the collar is even a fashion statement. However, the collar decision should be based on more than appearance. Here's why:

Anders Hallgren conducted a chiropractic study in Sweden that showed that 252 of 400 dogs had misaligned spines, and 65% of the 252 with spinal problems also had behavioral problems. Only 30% of dogs without spinal injuries had behavioral problems. 78% of the dogs labeled aggressive or hyperactive had spinal problems. The dogs in this study were considered well-cared for and were volunteered for the study by their owners, so the study did not include dogs where owners would have abusive handling to hide. (Cited in Paul Owens' *The Dog Whisperer: A Compassionate, Nonviolent Approach to Dog Training*)

How many of the spinal problems found in the Hallgren study could be related to leash dynamics—pulling by the dog, jerking by the human? After letting this question nag me for over 6 years, I finally began to research the possible roles that collars and leashes play in a dog's well being.

Dr. Julie Kaufman, specializing in animal chiropractic, (www.chiropracticforanimals.net) has treated dogs with "KNOWN" [her emphasis] injuries directly caused from a choke-chain; from a sudden jerk or pull from the leash/chain/rope; or from being tied outside. A collar puts pressure on the neck in what, too often, results in injuries to the dog. Dr. Kaufman explains, "One dog was completely paralyzed in both front legs following a jerk on the collar. She had several discs blown as a result and eventually regained movement after weeks of chiropractic and acupuncture

[treatments]. In fact, neck injuries from collars are so common that we see new cases every few weeks."

Dr. Kaufman often uses a model dog skeleton to illustrate how pulling will affect the joint segments. This helps dog owners visualize how a small tug can easily injure or even slightly dislocate a segment of the spine. She adds, "Since research indicates that it only takes the weight of a dime to depress a nerve's function by 50%, it's understandable how a tug on a narrow collar could cause major pressure and trauma to a small area of the neck. If you catch the neck at a critical angle, you could blow a disc, cause nerve or muscle injury or worse."

Premier, a highly respected company that provides safe, effective, and humane training tools for pets, found in a recent survey that 96% of Veterinarians report having seen or heard of a collar-related injury or death within the last year. That translates to thousands of suffering and/or dead dogs each year.

Tracheal collapse has happened to dogs who have only worn a flat collar for leash walking. When on a leash, regular pressure from the collar—whether because the dog or the human pulls—is often at the root of this.

What's a human to do about collars?

Here are some collars to consider. They all should help a dog learn not to pull while protecting from neck trauma. (While this list is not comprehensive, you will want to consider collars that have similar and tested attributes.)

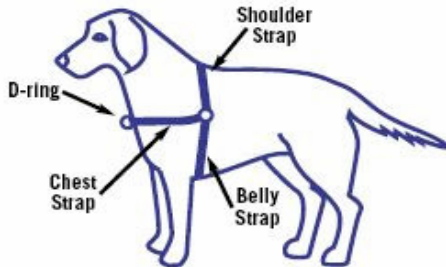
1. **Head Collar** (Gentle Leader by Premier or Halti Head Collar)



2. **KeepSafe Break Away collar (Premier)**



3. **Easy Walk Harness (Premier)**



4. **Prong/Pinch Collar, if, and only if, you are working with a trainer, using positive reinforcement training methods.**



This should be properly fitted and never worn unless you are actively training your dog. Your trainer can advise you which brand(s) to purchase.

Head collars, like the Gentle Leader or the Halti, consist of nylon straps—one fits around the base of the muzzle and the other, around the back of the neck. The strap around the base of the muzzle allows you to lead the dog in the direction you want to go rather than pulling on the dog's neck. The strap around the back of the neck applies pressure to a point that triggers a dog to naturally relax and thus has a calming effect—some LEARN volunteers have called that glazed, relaxed look on a dog the “Zen Effect.” Head collars are not muzzles; dogs can eat, drink, pant, carry toys, and even howl while wearing one. Head collars can also be highly effective training

tools. It is vital that the collar is properly fitted and introduced. LEARN carries a DVD on fitting the Gentle Leader as well as one for training with the head collar, available for only the cost of mailing. See www.labadoption.org/merchandise.

The **KeepSafe Break Away** collar has a patented safety buckle or release mechanism if your dog's collar gets caught on a fence, heat vent, another dog's jaw (while playing), or tree. After researching this article, I purchased a KeepSafe for our Lab. This summer he got caught in large branches in a hard-to-access area along a riverbank. He returned without his collar. The KeepSafe may have saved his life as a traditional flat collar, like the ones he's worn for years, could have literally hung him over the river. I immediately purchased a second KeepSafe. The KeepSafe has two metal loops on either side of the safety buckle so that a leash can be attached without the collar releasing. (Make sure your dog isn't likely to bolt away if the collar releases in the woods. Micro-chipping is a great back up for identification.)

The **Easy Walk harness** discourages pulling because it attaches to the leash in the front. In contrast, traditional harnesses encourage the “sled dog” reaction which is to PULL. Again, after researching, I purchased an Easy Walk and have been very pleased. Our mostly leash-trained Lab would pull to grab anything edible that he saw before the human knew to say “leave it.” This harness protects his neck and trachea.

The **Prong/Pinch collar**—do your research and talk to more than one trainer to see if this is right for you. Ask your trainer what his or her experience is with prong collars and how/when it's recommended to use them.

Deb Hamele, founder and former President of LABMED and experienced trainer, has strong warnings against the choke/chain collar but believes that the prong collar has been given an undeservedly bad reputation because of its appearance. Prongs/ pinches must be fitted properly to be safe and effective. The user should be taught how to fit and use them properly—you could easily put your dog at risk if you try to figure it out yourself. Note: Prong collars should

only be worn when the dog is being actively trained. They should not be used at any other time because they could get caught on something resulting in injury.

Prongs are considered a "self correcting" collar. Deb explains, "you do not have to give a jerk or pull on the collar. The dog usually pulls once or twice and finds the collar tightens and then never pulls again -- I have seen that dramatic of a result in classes I have taught again and again. It then becomes the dog's choice to either pull or walk nicely; no correction needed on the part of the human partner." Deb cautions that in the case of aggressive dogs, a prong/pinch collar could make the dog more aggressive if used in a harsh manner.

Choke chains/collars are **NOT** recommended for the general dog owner; they do exactly what they say: choke! And they don't help the dog figure out how to behave properly unless through fear, not a productive training dynamic. In fact, most of the bloody injuries from collars come from chokers. LABMED has helped many recover from such injury. You may visit http://www.labmed.org/ss_angel.html or http://www.labmed.org/ss_rex.html to view photos of how serious these injuries can be.

A study in Germany highlights the distinction between prong and choke collars (quoted from <http://www.cobankopegi.com/prong.html>; the site also includes comments by Bonnie Dalzell, MA,)

- 100 dogs were in the study. 50 used choke and 50 used prong.
- The dogs were studied for their entire lives. As dogs died, autopsies were performed.
- Of the 50 which had chokes, 48 had injuries to the neck, trachea, or back. 2 of those were determined to be genetic. The other 46 were caused by trauma.
- Of the 50 which had prongs, 2 had injuries in the neck area, 1 was determined to be genetic. 1 was caused by trauma.

Des Hawgood, of the Institute of Animal Care Education in England, has a web article on the "Misuse of Choke Chains" and advocates

legislation to outlaw the use of choke collars because of the huge number of injuries and death. Injuries from choke collars include: Injured ocular vessels; tracheal and oesophageal damage; severely sprained necks; cases of fainting; transient foreleg paralysis; recurrent laryngeal nerve paralysis, and hind leg ataxia. In some cases x-rays showed misalignment of the cervical vertebrae and in others, Horner's Syndrome was diagnosed. (X-rays were necessary because not all injuries are visible without them.)

(<http://www.uwsp.edu/psych/dog/LA/hawgood1.htm>)

To reiterate, **avoid any and all choke chains or collars**. There is **no** good reason to use a choke to walk your dog. You will likely pay not only for a choke collar but also for a shorter life in your dog and more vet expenses from health/injury. Worse, your dog suffers.

Do **not** use **shock collars** or any device which aims to provide an electric-generated correction unless you have been properly trained in their use. This is another story in itself, but these devices can cause health problems, fear, and aggression/behavioral issues as well as physical and/or ear pain. Improper use of such devices has resulted in everything from a confused dog to a tortured dog. If you currently use them, research them thoroughly to understand their many risks and dangers.

While this article has focused on collar and harness options, remember that **retractable leashes**—even though they may let your dog have more leeway to explore and run during a walk—usually result in a big jerk when the end of the line is reached. The unsuspecting dog always gets a big jerk, and sometimes smaller dogs experience a force which jolts them off the ground. With a flat collar, all this force is inflicted at the dog's neck. While retractable leashes have their strong advocates and opponents, I believe the risk of neck, spine, and/or tracheal damage is simply too great to recommend it.

In sum, your choice of collar may be the most important decision you make for your dog's health and longevity. Make sure to protect your dog's spine, neck, and trachea from the risks of a jerk or

pull. Make yours a conscious and well-informed choice.

A special thanks to Deb Hamele and Dr. Julie Kaufman for their sharing their expertise and experience.

For additional chiropractic information, visit <http://members.tripod.com/chlmera/tutorials/wadog.html>; this site, a primer in chiropractic, describes the risks associated with flat, choke, and prong collars and harnesses.

This article originally appeared in The Retriever, LEARN's newsletter, available at www.labadoption.org, in November, 2007.