



HEAD

by Suzanne Nelson

GAMES

What you need to know about headcollars

Rover continually pulls on his leash, no matter what. Lucy, meanwhile, goes into an all-out launch every time she sees the neighbor's terrier, leaving her human barely attached to the earth.

Many people turn to headcollars in an attempt to solve challenges like these. These devices are marketed as a way to humanely “rein in” over-the-top canines. But is a headcollar really the right choice for Rover or Lucy?



emphasize that the efficacy and safety of these devices depends on their fit, method of use, the skill of the handler – and on not using the headcollar as the sole point of contact with the dog.

Hint

Teaching the dog to avert his eyes is a canine calming response that often diffuses reactivity.

Making contact

Kathy Cascade of Stillwater, Oklahoma, specializes in working with aggressive dogs. For her, headcollars are instrumental in helping dogs with “pretty significant reactivity” learn to process new stressors while remaining calm. The key, she said, is having two points of leash contact.

This means using a leash with snaps at both ends; one clip goes on the headcollar, and the other is attached to a flat collar or, more usually, a harness. By having these two points of contact, Kathy’s goal is twofold: to take the pressure off the neck, and to give subtle, alternating signals. That way, there is no steady pressure on the neck or face, a situation that can further exacerbate undesirable behavior patterns. This method of working with headcollars derives from the Tellington TTouch method. TTouch is a gentle, non-threatening way of working with animals that promotes trust and a sense of well-being. “Our goal is to have the dogs in

physical balance with no pressure on them at all,” Kathy says.

Using a headcollar as the sole point of leash contact with the dog presents strife on several levels. “You don’t have the ability to eliminate steady pressure without making it more of a jerky motion,” Kathy says. As well, steady pressure on the leash tends to make “pull” dogs pull even more.



Photo: Stacy Lewis/Dancing Pecupine

Pros and cons

According to many trainers and veterinarians, the answer depends entirely on how these collars are used. When headcollars are regarded simply as a mechanical way to control behavior, the results are often increased frustration at both ends of the leash, and sometimes even neck injuries. Used in this fashion, some even regard them as glorified choke chains – effective, but at the expense of the relationship between handler and dog.

Others say that educating dogs – especially highly reactive ones – to live harmoniously in the world wouldn’t be nearly as effective without the ability to gently redirect the head with a headcollar. This can be an important first step in influencing behavior.

Regardless of how they personally feel about headcollars, dog professionals

Another problem Kathy sees is that people tend to fit the headcollar extremely tightly when it is the sole point of contact, out of fear that it may come off. This fit is often uncomfortable for the dog. Some models lock tightly at the throat and at the top of the head, causing pressure on the cervical spine and over-extension of the back. Other models fit too tightly at the jaw. Again, the solution is two points of contact, which allows the headcollar to fit more comfortably and provides a backup point of attachment with the dog.

Hint

Janet stresses that using the headcollar effectively means light signals rather than tugs on the leash.

The light touch

Janet Velenovsky, training and behavior education specialist for Premier, which makes the Gentle Leader headcollar, says their product was actually designed to fit tightly around the top of a dog's head and loosely around the nose for greatest comfort. When properly adjusted high around the back of the head, the headcollar works with the dog's opposition reflex to redirect pressure from the neck to the back of the head, encouraging him to slow down.

Photo: Stacy Lewis/Dancing Porcupine



Proper fit and a light touch are keys to using a headcollar safely and effectively.

Dr. Sue Ann Lesser, a veterinarian with 16 years of experience in canine spinal manipulation, cautions that snapping or jerky motions can lead to neck injuries, some of which may go undiagnosed. "A non-professional may see this as a dog who is squinting, doesn't like his neck touched, carries one ear higher than the other, has a painful facial expression, snaps when petting is attempted, or hides in seclusion."

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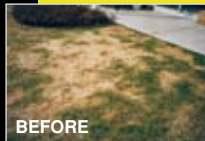
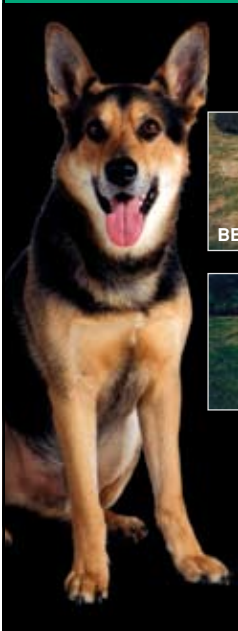
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“I would never advise headcollars to be used on dogs with cervical disk disease or wobblers disease,” she continues, adding that owners of breeds predisposed to these conditions, including beagles, cockers and miniature poodles, shouldn’t use headcollars as the sole point of leash contact. The same is true for small dogs in general, because the potential for harm is too great. “The two points of contact approach minimizes the torque to the cervical spine caused by the use of a headcollar alone.”

Cynthia Gordon, APDT, a dog trainer in Seminole, Florida, reports that one of her client’s dogs severed his spinal column after his person pulled back sharply while he lunged towards another dog while wearing a headcollar. He ended up being euthanized. The client has since successfully used a headcollar with a new dog after Cynthia showed her the second point of contact approach.

Kathy says headcollars can help dogs learn greater command over themselves if they are used in a way that promotes a posture of relaxation and an even weight distribution on all four feet. In her estimation, this is possible only when the headcollar is used to give light signals to the face, and then released. The signal on the headcollar is alternated with the second point of leash contact (flat collar or harness). Taken together, those signals allow the dog to experience physical balance, which Kathy says promotes mental and emotional balance as well.

She adds that people get into trouble



Photo: Stacy Lewis/Dancing Porcupine

when they attach a headcollar and then have the dog walk in front of them. “The problem is they have attached a six-foot lever, and once they pull, the force they are exerting is way stronger, they are pulling the dog’s head around, and there is no way to get the dog into balance.”

It is that sense of balance and ease that Kathy and others feel is our ultimate goal and responsibility when using headcollars. “That means you really have to pay attention. And you have to give the dog the signals to let him know what you want.”

Headcollars are among those devices that can easily be misused, but with some education and experience, they can become a valuable training tool.