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## Choosing the Right Type of Collar for Your Dog

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### Introduction

There are many varieties of dog collars available to dog owners today. The primary purpose of a collar is to provide an effective way for the owner to control his/her dog. In addition to the traditional flat buckle collar, consumers can also purchase martingale collars, harnesses, head collars, and pinch or choke collars. Each of type of collar or restraint is designed for a specific purpose. Some collars are appropriate for wear at all times, while others are specifically for walking the dog or for training sessions. Additionally, each type of collar is designed to fit the dog in a different way. An improperly fitted collar will not work in the manner it is designed to and can cause injury to the dog.

### Sort Out the Difference

The flat buckle collar is traditional. This type of collar fits around the dog's neck, just above where the neck meets the shoulder. As the name implies, this type of collar will have a metal or plastic buckle on it, somewhat similar to a belt. The buckle makes the collar size adjustable. These collars are available in many different materials, as well as a wide variety of colors and patterns. Leather and nylon are the two most common types of buckle collars.

Leather collars might break if pressure is applied for an extended period of time. This means if the dog becomes caught or "hung up" on something, the leather collar is more likely to break and free the animal than a nylon collar; however, a leather collar is not a "breakaway" collar. Leather collars may also stretch or crack as they age. Cleaning leather collars simply using soap and water will dry out the leather, and shorten its useful life. To prevent this from happening, be sure to apply leather conditioner or oil to the collar or other approved cleaning products designed for leather.

Nylon collars are less likely to break or stretch than leather collars. They can be cleaned by simply using soap and water. A properly fitted flat buckle collar will be somewhat snug; however, you should be able to easily fit two fingers between your pet's neck and the collar. A



*Gentle Leader® head collar.*

flat buckle collar that is too tight or dirty can cause skin irritation, so be sure to remove the collar periodically to check the condition of the hair and skin beneath it. In order to avoid a tight collar, measure the size of your dog's neck before purchasing a collar. At the store, the collar's package will generally give the sizes (in inches) to which it will adjust. If you are allowed to bring your pet into the store, you may also be allowed to try the collar on before purchasing it to ensure the best fit.

### Dog Size

Flat buckle collars are not the best type of collar for all types of dogs. Small and delicate dogs are prone to a condition called collapsing trachea. The trachea (the airway to the lungs) of these animals can actually become flattened or completely collapse as a result of pressure on the throat, such as when pulling on the collar during walks. These dogs are good candidates for harnesses when on a leash or being restrained in another manner.



*Leather flat buckle collar.*

A harness will not place pressure on the dog's throat because it fits around the dog's chest and ribcage. Harnesses are also more difficult for a dog to slip out of than a flat buckle collar. The harness should be snug, but still allow two fingers to slip easily beneath it. Harness size is determined by the size of the dog's girth, the widest part of the ribcage just behind the elbows. To find your dog's harness size, simply measure the size around your dog's girth and add about two inches. Harnesses usually fasten with a buckle, so the size is adjustable. The harness package will list the size range in inches.

Harnesses are available in both leather and nylon, and cleaning and maintenance for the harness is the same as for the leather and nylon collars. Other dogs that are good candidates for harnesses are animals that have a relatively large neck when compared to their head (e.g. greyhounds, pugs, etc.). These dogs may slip their head through a properly fitted flat buckle collar. Although harnesses do address the problem of small-headed dogs slipping out of a flat buckle collar, they have been known to encourage pulling. A new "sensation" harness may be a better choice than a traditional harness because it allows the head to be free, but inhibits pulling behavior.

Another option for a dog with a large neck and a small head is the martingale collar (or Premier collar). The martingale collar has a loop that connects two ends of a flat collar and can be made of nylon, leather or chain. A pull on this loop will cause the collar to tighten only as far as the ends of the flat collar, thereby reducing the opportunity for choking or damage to the trachea. A martingale collar is fitted like a flat buckle collar.

A head collar fits around the dog's muzzle and the neck. There is a nose loop and a neck strap, and is an excellent solution for a dog that pulls when it is being lead, or for a large dog with a small child. The head collar may look



*Leather flat buckle collar.*

strange, but it is highly recommended by dog trainers as a safe and gentle product. Three popular brands of head collars are the Gentle Leader™, the Halti, and the Snoot Loop. Each of these brands assigns sizes based on the dog's weight, and has slightly different adjustment instructions. To ensure you fit it properly, read the instructions for any head collar you select for your dog.

Although the head collar fits around the dog's muzzle, it does not force the mouth to be closed. When properly adjusted, the dog can still open its mouth to pant, eat, and drink. The dog will also react more quickly to pressure on the muzzle and the back of the neck, making it an effective training tool. The head collar also takes the pressure away from the dog's neck and body, which can cause pain and fear.

The Gentle Leader™ is the most common head collar. A properly adjusted Gentle Leader™ will have a tight neck strap. You should only be able to get one finger between the neck strap and the dog's skin. The nose strap should be able to move freely from just in front of the eyes to the beginning of the fleshy part of the nose, while fitting just below the dog's eyes and past the corner of his lips.

## **Training**

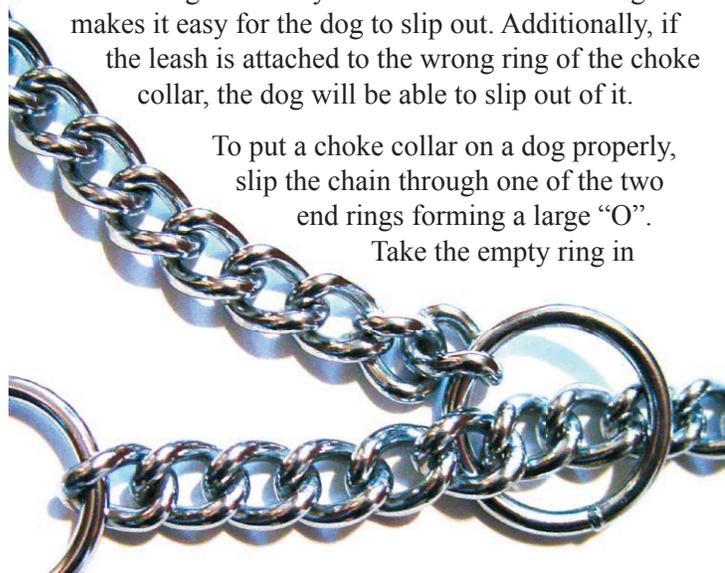
Training collars (commonly called choke chains or choke collars) and pinch collars are designed to be used as training tools only. They should not be left on after training because the dog can easily injure or kill himself if he becomes caught on something. A choke collar or pinch collar is not an "every day" dog collar. A choke collar is usually a metal chain with a large ring at each end. The collar is looped back on itself and slipped over the dog's head. It is designed to fit very loosely until pressure is applied. A pinch collar is used when the handler wishes to use an even more severe collar than a choke collar. A pinch collar is made up of metal links with prongs or points on the inside of the collar. When pressure is applied

**The proper location and fit of a flat buckle collar, head collar, and harness.**



to the collar, the prongs are pressed into the dog's skin to cause discomfort. Both choke and pinch collars are losing popularity as training tools because they are often used as part of punishment-based training. This type of training can cause dogs to become fearful and break down the positive relationship between the dog and owner or trainer. If you do choose to use this type of collar for training, the proper fit is important. It is also important to know how to use the collar properly without causing injury to the trachea. A choke collar is designed to constrict around the dog's neck and is likely to cause injury if not used properly. Unlike the martingale collar, there is no mechanical barrier to choking, so it is important to be very careful when using a choke collar. Pinch collars can also cause injury if used improperly because the prongs will dig into the dog's neck. A collar that is too small will pinch or choke the dog constantly and a collar that is too large makes it easy for the dog to slip out. Additionally, if the leash is attached to the wrong ring of the choke collar, the dog will be able to slip out of it.

To put a choke collar on a dog properly, slip the chain through one of the two end rings forming a large "O". Take the empty ring in



your left hand and the rest of the O in your right. The collar should now resemble a side-ways "P". With your dog sitting on your left hand side, slip the collar over his head. The stem of the side-ways P goes across the top of the neck and the empty ring is attached to the leash. The collar should tighten when pressure is applied and loosen immediately once the pressure has stopped. The collar should not "stick" in the tight position after pressure is released.

When measuring your dog for a choke collar, measure the size of his neck and add three inches. Pinch collars should also be three inches larger than the circumference of the dog's neck. Choke and pinch collars can seriously injure a dog when improperly used, therefore, unless you are a trained expert, you should seek another collar type for your dog. For many people who have difficulty controlling a strong dog, the head collar is an effective way to gain control, while not causing injury to the dog.

### Conclusion

A properly fitted collar can make walking, training, and interacting with your dog an easy and pleasant experience for both human and animal. A collar should not hurt a dog or interfere with its normal activities. This paper has provided an overview of the different types of collars, their uses, and the way in which they should fit. However, if there is any doubt about a collar, consult a veterinarian, trainer, or other animal professional before putting it on a dog.

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