

# Head Collars (Gentle Leaders and Haltis)

Please note this article is not here to 'condemn' the use of head collars, but explore the potential fallouts, pros and cons, our stance when it comes to using these (I think this is very important and often not explored, due to potential responses) and remembering the guardian behind the lead.

Please read this carefully and be mindful if you are commenting on the group thread or considering recommending head collar to others. This is a very sensitive subject, hence us exploring it in depth.

PPN do not promote or recommend the use of some equipment, such as head collars, that can restrict the natural movements of the dog, or that work to stop pulling by applying pressure. However, we understand that (in some cases) they are used as a last resort (when other options have been explored) or for safety implications. However like any training equipment, head collars must be used with care and with complete awareness of the possible effects on the dog (physically, mentally & emotionally) (Suzanne Clothier, 2023).

In cases where head collars are used, we recommend doing so in a combination known as 'scaffolding', and we suggest a 'weaning-off period' with training sessions from a qualified professional. Susanne Clothier, discusses this in her article 'the problem with head halters', in which she raises a similar point saying:

*"A respectful, committed relationship built on trust, mutual respect, attentiveness and empathy, backed up with a buckle collar or martingale collar and a leash to keep your dog safe. Anything else is a band-aid or a crutch that may have to be used for a while as we work toward that kind of relationship."*

And then another important pointer:

*"Head halters, like all training equipment, need to be used carefully" (Susanne Clothier, 2023).*

Where one is currently being used, due to an ongoing safety issue, our members generally suggest the 'Dogmatic' (made from leather, which is better suited to more powerful dogs) or 'Kumfi Dogalter' and for it to be introduced properly (and, where possible, used in conjunction with another lead and harness – known as 'scaffolding' as above).

Please note – we continue to discuss and update this subject in our ethical guidelines. Our Ambassador, Carrie Anne-Selwyn, has also done extensive research on this subject.

## Health and safety implications

### Cons

There may be some health implications attributed to the use of head collars, including:

- Injury to the neck and spine
- Prevention of natural gait
- Inability to determine his/her personal space.

- The potential of soft tissue damage and damage to the spine, particularly the cervicals (Suzanne Clothier, 2023).
- Nothing in dog's physical construction or his nervous system prepares him for the force of an unexpected, externally directed, sideways and upward movement of the head while his body is still moving forward (Suzanne Clothier, 2023).
- Quoted by Dog's Today 2020 *"Lip-licking and yawning are behavioural signs of stress in dogs and along with attempts to remove the restraint, these were seen significantly more frequently when dogs were wearing a headcollar. This suggests that the Headcollar causes discomfort and stress, which can compromise welfare."* (Dogs Today,

There have been few long-term health studies done on the effects of head collars, but nearly every article (even those recommending their use) contained a strong warning about potential neck injuries if the dog reaches the end of the lead at speed, as well as a caution about potential damage from ongoing use. There are also concerns on a more regular basis, if pressure is exerted on the halter, pulling the dog's head to the side (Kommetjie Canine College, 2019). We strongly recommend never using one with a long line!

## Pros

In some situations head collars are used to protect the welfare and safety of both guardian and dogs. It would be unethical to just walk into a session and ask the owner to remove this equipment. As above 'scaffolding' is recommended in situations like this where a harness is also attached with an additional lead. That way the owner can feel more in control and the head collar becomes more of a 'safety blanket'. Of course in situations where a dog's walk is leading to extreme stress for both dog and owner, we further look at the environment the dog is walked in and options of secure fields that may be available. And as a behaviourist/trainer working with behavioural cases we should all be exploring any potential medical and pain issues (plus this is important to consider in all pet services).

Suzanne Clothier raises another valid point on 'slowing down' and considering some of the above other:

*"Much of the training equipment in existence is needed because the dog is being asked to work in situations where he does not have the skills or the ability to think clearly and behave appropriately. When we work slowly and carefully to keep the dog engaged and thinking, the need for equipment begins to fall away very quickly. If we push the dog (or have never established a solid working relationship with him), we'll need equipment."*

In some situations support with handling may be recommended with a 'assisted training walk' particularly those owners who are recovering from a recent operation or have mobility issues. And sadly in some cases the dog is just not suited to the home due to the needs, particularly a high energy working dogs. Of course when discussing this we must be sensitive to the owner's needs and feelings and look at all options available.

## Unpleasant to some dogs

It is clear that some head collars are unpleasant to dogs. In my personal experience, I have seen many dogs rubbing their muzzles on the floor, against people and furniture, in an attempt to push off or alleviate the pressure. This can lead to cuts on the skin, fur falling out and, in some extreme cases, sores leading to infection.

## Emotional effects

Working with many dogs, particularly anxious dogs, I've noticed how head collars have had a negative effect on their emotional behaviour. I have witnessed anxious dogs having their head collar removed and become less tense. When approaching other dogs, to whom we were trying to create a positive association, I felt the head collar did the opposite - making it much more challenging to help them feel relaxed. Kommetjie Canine College, 2019 also found similar:

*"Working with dogs for twenty years and becoming increasingly aware of their body language and what this indicated about their emotional state, I started to see the detrimental effect that head collars had on dogs."*

*"Many people advocate head halters because they seem to calm dogs down. But in fact, it suppresses behaviour and causes general inhibition."*

Suzanne Clothier discusses the easiest test with a head halter:

*"The easiest test I know of whether or not the head halter is having an overall suppressive effect on the dog is this: take it off. Does the dog visibly brighten? Does his body posture change? Does the light return to his eyes? I'm not talking about the joy of simply being set free to run and play. I'm talking about the difference between the dog standing there on leash and collar but without the head halter vs. the dog wearing the head halter. If there is a difference, I think the aware trainer has to ask, "Then why am I doing this to this animal?"*

## How they work

Here's how 'Gentle Leader' explains it in their own training manual:

*The Gentle Leader® does not choke your dog. It is scientifically designed to direct your dog's entire body by controlling his head and nose. And wherever his nose goes, his body must surely follow! The Gentle Leader® dissuades your dog from pulling on the lead by transferring the pressure of his efforts to the back of his neck via the neck strap, while the pressure of the nose loop communicates your reassuring control. Your dog's instinctive resistance to these redirected pressures causes him to stop pulling to relieve the pressure at the back of the head and to relax and walk easily by your side.*

## Research

Comparison of dogs' reactions to four different head collars-

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0168159102001156>

### **Summary (quoted from paper):**

*"Dogs wore the collars only during testing sessions. Observed behaviors were divided into two groups. Group 1 included pawing, pawing nose, biting/pawing leash, opening mouth, rubbing*

*face, and shaking head. Group 2 included rearing up, balking, rushing forward, and rolling on ground. No statistical difference was observed between dogs' reactions to the head collar types."*

Nottingham Trent University (Dog's Today, 2021) – *"The recent research conducted at Nottingham Trent University (Carter et al. 2020) has confirmed dog owners concerns that traditional collars can cause damage to their dog's neck, especially when the dog pulls, likening the pressure exerted on the dog's neck to that of a tourniquet."*

A recent study at Myerscough college using thermal imaging (Dog's Today, 2021):

*"The study at Myerscough college used thermal imaging techniques which have become a popular method of obtaining biological data from animals. A thermal imaging camera can be used to measure changes in the temperature of extremities which indicate stress. An animal under stress will experience a raised core temperature and simultaneous cooling of the extremities as they prepare for the flight or fight response. In this study a thermal imaging camera was used to measure changes in external ear temperature in response to wearing a harness or a headcollar.*

*Findings revealed a more significant fall in ear temperature when wearing the headcollar suggesting a higher level of stress."*

## Conclusion

Here at PPN, we are not vilifying people who use them. However, our ethical guidelines recommend a 'weaning out period' for clients, especially where there are ongoing safety issues. We feel that Kommetjie Canine College, 2019 sum the use of head collars quite nicely:

*"I think that most people are simply unaware of the effect that these collars have, or they are not noticing the change in emotional state when the halter is put on and taken off. It took me years to wake up to what I was seeing – hopefully we are all learning and improving on what we do as our knowledge increases. Using a head collar is certainly not the only thing I did in the past that I would not do now.*

*What I would ask, is that if you do use a head collar or advocate their use – do a simple test. Try and work with the dog without one for a change and, keeping an open mind, see if you notice the difference. Start paying attention to what your dog looks like before the halter is put on, while it is on and when it is taken off. What changes in body language do you see? Do you notice a change in activity level? If you are using a head halter to address reactivity, what happens if your dog is in that same situation just on a harness? If your dog becomes reactive when the head collar is taken off, then your dog should not be in that situation – the halter is simply hiding the issue, it is not resolving it."*

-Kommetjie Canine College, 2019

## **Further reading – as recommended by Dog's Today**

CARTER, A., MCNALLY, D. and ROSHIER, A. (2020) Canine collars: an investigation of collar type and the forces applied to a simulated neck model. *Veterinary Record*.

GRAINGER, J., WILLS, A.P. and MONTROSE, V.T. (2016) The behavioural effects of walking on a collar and harness in domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*). *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 14, 60-64.

HAUG, L.I., BEAVER, B.V., LONGNECKER, M.T. (2002) Comparison of dogs' reactions to four different head collars. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 79, 53-61.

OGBURN, P., CROUSE, S., MARTIN, F. and HOUPPT, K. (1998) Comparison of behavioural and physiological responses of dogs wearing two different types of collars. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 61, 133-142.