

Training Dogs – Head Halter Training

Why should I halter-train my dog?

Head halters are commonly used as an alternative to neck control collars and have many advantages. Firstly, they make control easier, requiring less physical effort, so you don't end up battling with your pet or trying to save your shoulders from being pulled out of their sockets when going for a walk like you do when using a flat neck collar.

"... where the nose goes the body follows."

The head halter has a strap that encircles the muzzle, and where the nose goes the body follows ('aka' power steering for dogs). Secondly, dogs pulling on neck collars can injure themselves as the collar presses into the trachea and neck. In addition, ocular pressure (pressure within the eyes) may increase with pressure against a neck collar, which may prove a risk to dogs with glaucoma. Dogs that pull may also be at greater risk of becoming aggressive to strangers or dogs that they meet on walks if they are punished or choked each time they meet a new person or animal. Thirdly, some head halters give you control over the dog's mouth, which may help control barking, turn the head away from the stimulus and reduce the risk of dog biting. However, if you know your pet has an aggression problem, a muzzle may be more suitable as it will prevent biting without having to rely on owner control (See 'Training Products for Dogs – Muzzle Training' handout). For further details on how head halters compare to other training products see our handout 'Training Products for Dogs – To Choke or Not to Choke'.

How do head halters work?

The head halter is an excellent aid for control and training. However, it is primarily a tool to help you achieve success. Some time and effort will be needed for your dog to adapt to wearing a head halter, and for you to insure that it is fitted and used correctly. Although it may be possible to use the head halter successfully with the aid of the support materials that accompany the head halter (along with this handout), additional guidance from a trainer who is familiar with head halter use may help to insure success.

Briefly, head halters work by applying pressure behind the neck and around the muzzle so that the pet can be prompted to display the desired response. As soon as the desired response is achieved, the release of tension (negative reinforcement) and the presentation of a reward (positive reinforcement) can be used to increase the chance of the pet repeating the behavior as it learns the target behavior that achieves reinforcement. As soon as the pet responds reliably, verbal cues / commands can be added. Since pets tend to pull against pressure, a strategic but gentle pull in just the right direction may be all that is needed to get your pet moving in the opposite direction.



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How do I use a head halter to aid in the training of desirable behaviors such as a sit, relaxed walk, quiet, turn around, back up and down with a head halter?

With a few inches of slack on the leash the dog can be taught to walk on a loose leash by gently pulling the head back and releasing when the dog is walking by your side, or by pulling forward which should cause the dog to back up. Pulling gently to the side will reorient the dog's head away from the stimulus and toward the owner (turn away, focus). Pulling more firmly will close the mouth to stop barking or biting, while a pull upward and forward (with the aid of the second hand cupped under the chin if necessary) should insure a sit. Slight modification to the head position can then be used to teach the dog to maintain eye contact (focus / watch). Should the pet start to rise, a gentle pull upward and forward should help to maintain the sit, provided the release is properly timed to occur as soon as the sit is achieved.

"A gentle continuous pull rather than a jerk should be used to achieve the desired behavior."

Interestingly many dogs will move into a protracted and settled down when they realize that they are unable to rise from the sit. A gentle continuous pull rather than a jerk should be used to achieve the desired behavior. Once success is achieved, training should proceed to varied environments and slightly more complex tasks (e.g. teaching the dog to sit during greeting rather than jumping up).

How do I use head halters to help manage undesirable behaviors?

The head halter can also serve as a tool to interrupt undesirable behavior and achieve the desirable response during training. For example, the head halter and leash can be used to prompt the dog to be quiet when barking, or to "stop" puppy mouthing. Similarly a pull on the leash can be used to immediately curtail pulling, barking, chewing, stealing, stool eating and some forms of aggression. With a long leash left attached, the head halter can also be used to interrupt behaviors from afar such as garbage raiding, housesoiling or digging.

Aren't halters irritating to dogs?

Halters themselves are not cruel, but like any collar they can cause irritation if a little time is not spent fitting the halter properly and training your animal to accept wearing it. If the guidelines below are followed, your pet should actually enjoy wearing the halter. The most common errors are to immediately think your dog will accept the new sensation on its face, and allowing it to get the halter off. Critical issues are to insure proper fitting, to apply the head halter in association with something positive, to prevent the dog from removing the halter until it is settled, and to use the halter properly so that keeping the dog in the loose leash / released position rather than pulling on the head halter should be the focus of training.

How do I get my dog to feel comfortable wearing a head halter?

1. Show your dog the halter, let him sniff to investigate it, and hold a treat through the open noseband so he voluntarily puts his nose through the ring. Repeat this procedure several times with the strap resting on the dog's nose for increasingly longer times before the treat is given. This starts to build a positive association with the muzzle loop. Some dogs may need to first associate the sight of the head halter and touching the head halter (target training) before applying over the nose.

2. With the Gentle Leader™ head halter, the neck strap can be fitted separately from the nose band. Before proceeding to attaching the full halter, adjust the neck strap as with most other neck collars, but be sure to insure a snug fit (see fitting below).
3. Gradually expect more from your pet when you introduce the halter. Put the halter on and reward your dog with it on and again when you take it off. Slowly increase the time you leave it on and practice feeding treats with the halter on, but only when he is not pawing or rubbing at the collar. You may be able to keep your dog distracted by playing a game, giving treats or going for a short walk with the leash attached to the neck collar. Alternately you can leave the leash attached and use a gentle pull if your dog tries to paw at or pull off the head halter.
4. Next you can apply the head halter and lead, and leave the leash trailing. You should aim to work towards keeping your dog haltered for about five to ten minutes. Try to keep your dog distracted and playing and give rewards when he is not focusing on the head halter.
5. When you first begin to use the lead to control your dog, make sure your dog's attention is focused on you. You should be animated and talk to him continuously, with lots of verbal praise. This also serves as a distraction from the halter, which reduces the chances of him pawing at it. You can use a lure or target and many small tasty rewards to keep your dog focused and on task. Training can begin indoors, in your yard or on a short walk. Make sure you frequently change directions by applying gentle tension to the lead while keeping up the praise and treats. Alternatively you might play a game such as turning circles, in which your pet is encouraged to gently turn in one direction then the other. In this way your dog learns that you have control of the head with light pressure and verbal commands.
6. Never remove the halter when your pet is trying to remove it. He can be encouraged to leave it alone by a slight tug on a lead. When he relaxes, the halter can be removed. Consider whether you are expecting too much too soon. The important rule is to work at a rate that your pet can accept and cope with. This may mean that the whole program may take a few days rather than a few minutes.
7. In some cases a faster acclimating technique may be preferred. First adjust and fit the neck strap and then take it off. Next, using treats or a favored toy as a lure, distraction and reward, slip the nose strap over the nose and continue to distract the dog with the treats or toy while attaching the neck strap. Then, using a leash, favored food treats and plenty of praise, it may be possible to play with your dog or take him for a short walk while he gets accustomed to the head halter. By making the walk fun, keeping the pet distracted and using food rewards to mark the desirable response, many pets will adapt to the head halter by the end of the first training session.

How do I fit and use the head halter?

The keys to head halter success are to insure proper fitting, to understand how to apply and release pressure in training, and to understand the proper use of rewards. Here is a brief overview for fitting and use of the Gentle Leader™.

Ensure proper fit. The head halter should fit high against the back of the skull and snug enough that it will not slip around the neck when the leash is pulled. By insuring a snug fit of the neck strap, the nose band can be adjusted so that there is little or no constriction. When first applying the head halter, it can be helpful to first ensure that the neck strap is properly adjusted, and then remove the neck collar. Next, offer food treats through the nose loop and when the dog extends its nose through the loop, give the treats to reward and distract the dog while attaching the neck strap.

Get the desired response. By constantly maintaining a few inches of slack on the leash, only a short gentle pull should be needed to get the desired response. A pull up and forward can achieve eye contact (for target training, control and safety), close the mouth, and get the dog to heel, sit or focus. As soon as the desired response can be consistently achieved, a cue word (command) can then be added.

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Motivate. An encouraging calm voice, targeting, and appealing eye contact should be used to help motivate the pet to respond. Positive reinforcement is then given when the dog responds appropriately.

Command training. If the owner gives a command and the dog does not immediately respond, the head halter is pulled immediately and gently (but firm enough to succeed) to achieve the desired response (sit, heel, quiet). The owner then releases tension as soon as the desired response is achieved. If the desired response is maintained, a reward is given immediately (e.g. food, clicker, toy, praise, stroking) to mark the correct response so that future success is ultimately driven by rewards. In practice, the behavior should not be given a name or command until you can reliably achieve the desired behavior.

Pull - release - reward. By pulling on the head halter, the desired behavior can be quickly achieved and the pressure released when the response has been achieved. As the owner releases (by letting out a small amount of slack), the dog may then continue to exhibit the desired response (for which a reward should be given) or may begin to resume the undesirable response (e.g. tries to stand, lunge ahead, bark), in which case the pull (tension) should be reapplied. In some cases it may take numerous repetitions of the pull and release to get the desired response but the total time to achieve success might not be much more than a few seconds. By releasing only a small amount of slack, it will require only a slight pull to regain control.

How do I use the head halter to treat behavior problems?

"... the owner can proceed to more complex tasks and more difficult environments."

Once the head halter is fitted properly and can be used successfully to achieve a relaxed sit and heel in the absence of any distractions, the owner can proceed to more complex tasks and more difficult environments.

To achieve a relaxed sit and focus: The dog can be taught to sit and stay for gradually longer periods of time before the reward is given. The leash should be relaxed with a few inches of slack, but if the dog begins to rise or break focus a gentle pull up and forward should be used to maintain the sit. For most problems, training should then proceed to greater degrees of relaxation, by watching the dog's body postures and breathing, and reinforcing only when sufficiently relaxed. The owner can then begin to move away from the dog (still maintaining only an inch or two of slack) to train the dog to stay and not to follow or lunge forward.

To teach a relaxed down, the dog is reinforced for lying in place with a short amount of slack on the leash, and reinforced for gradually longer down times. If the dog begins to rise during the session the leash is used to maintain the down position. Rewards are given and the dog released to rise at the end of each session. As with sit / focus, the goal is to reinforce gradually longer and increasingly more relaxed sessions of down time. Relaxation can be observed by monitoring breathing and body postures (e.g. lying over onto one hip).

Another useful command is to teach the dog to go to its mat or bed and stay in place until released. Again progressively longer and more relaxed behavior should be reinforced before release.

Once the dog will settle and relax in a sit, down, or on its bed, these commands can be used as part of a program to improve undesirable behavior. Since the goal of retraining is to teach the dog the desired response, rather than to punish undesirable behavior, the commands and head halter can be used to help achieve success. For example the dog can be trained to sit and focus or to lie down calmly when visitors come to the front door and be reinforced for proper greeting behavior.

Similarly if the dog is trained with a head halter and rewards to walk with a slack leash by the owner's side (heel), then the heel exercise (or sit and focus) and the head halter can be used to keep the dog calm and under control in environments where it might lunge or jump up during a walk.

When the person or animal approaching cannot be effectively controlled, or if there is a limit to how close your dog can approach another dog or person, the goal is to end each exposure with a calm and positive outcome. Teaching the dog to back up can usually be accomplished quite quickly with head halter training by pulling forward on the leash and taking a step or two backward. Lures and targets can be used to more quickly achieve the desired outcome, as long as the pet is immediately rewarded with a release (and a positive reinforcer if available) as soon as it backs up a few steps. Make a game of the back up exercise so that the pet can eventually move back 20 paces or more on command. Similarly if the pet is beginning to pull ahead and it needs to be removed from the situation, a command such as let's go can be extremely effective at both preventing confrontation and diffusing anxiety. While walking on a loose leash, teach your dog to turn and follow you by saying a command such as let's go or turn around and beginning to walk in the other direction. A lure or target may quickly achieve these goals in a positive way, but a gentle pull on the head halter (and a release and positive reinforcer as the dog begins to follow) can insure that the head is turned in the direction of the owner and reward and away from the stimulus. See our handouts on 'Training Dogs – Controlling Pulling on Walks' for further details.

These two commands help to insure that a positive outcome can be achieved with each exposure by using the back up or let's go just before the pet gets anxious or at the very least to calmly remove the pet from a potentially problematic situation should problems begin to arise.

For specific applications and problems see our other handouts, and for more details on fitting and use of the Gentle Leader™ see www.abrionline.org.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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