

Choke and Prong Collars: How do They Work?

When choke or prong collars stop a dog from pulling on a leash, they do so because they hurt. The dog learns that it hurts to pull and so he stops. The reason you sometimes see dogs gasping away on one is that sometimes the collar doesn't hurt enough to dissuade a particular dog from pulling. This is a matter of individual pain thresholds and the technique used. For instance, sometimes owners start out with a regular collar and, when that doesn't work, try a choker and then, when that stops working, go to a prong collar. Ironically, although they are trying to be kind by gradually escalating the painfulness of the device they are using, they might be desensitizing their dog to the pain and so end up using alarming levels of force to get the job done.

A dog taught not to pull with one of these collars must continue to wear it—usually for months or years, and sometimes for life—as pulling on leash is easily relearned once the collar is off. And if their owners alternate back and forth, the dog may learn that it is dangerous to pull when the choke or prong collar is on but safe to pull when it's off and so adjusts his behavior accordingly. This is a function of how animals learn and not an example of dogs being “bad.”

Happily for dogs, the discussion about such collars is an increasingly academic one, as alternative means of training and managing even extra-large dogs are now available. Head-halters and anti-pull harnesses for dogs achieve terrific control mechanically (i.e. by changing leverage points) rather than through the use of pain. So, given the existence of more humane devices, the role of choke and prong collars is questionable at best. There are trainers still advocating them and owners still buying them, as they are currently still legal. But they will likely be made illegal over time.

