

The Shocking Truth

How the Marketing of Shock Collars Misleads Pet Dog Owners



When we consider modern dog training methods, there are three areas which should be considered: the effect on the dog's physical well-being, the impact on the dog's mental health, and the ethics of using shock on an animal that must depend upon and trust us to fulfill its needs. The use of a shock collar is detrimental to the animal on all three levels.

Shock collars are marketed to pet owners and trainers for specific purposes including: "training" for obedience, recall, and hunting. Shock collars are also used for containment (electronic fences) both inside and outside, and to correct "problematic behavior such as barking as seen in the use of "bark-collars." Due to the physical and psychological problems resulting from the use of shock collars, they cannot be recommended for any of these applications.

How They Work!

Mechanically, a shock collar is designed to deliver varying levels of electrical shock to a dog. Jim Casey, a mechanical engineer with more than 35 years of experience, describes how they work:

"In the collars, there are two terminals that contact the animal's skin. When the circuit is activated, one terminal is energized. The 'load' is the animal's flesh and the other terminal provides the ground return path. Note that even though the two terminals on the collar are only a few centimeters apart, the electricity follows the path of least-resistance. If the skin is dry and non-conductive, the voltage in the collar is high enough so that the electricity can spark through the skin into moist, conductive tissue underneath that is full of nerve endings. If the unit fails to work when the remote button is pushed, the operator may increase the intensity and the dog receives a highly-intense shock rather than a gradual increase. The effect of the shock on the dog will vary. There is no way to

determine how intense the shock will feel because of variables such as the individual's skin thickness and coat, moisture on the skin, whether the skin is broken or split and the level of electrolytes in bodily fluids."

How They Are Marketed

Marketers like to use neutral euphemisms to disguise the harsh reality of shock collars. They are often called "e-collars," "remote collars," "training collars" and other benign terms. In a similar way, the painful shock delivered to the dog is referred to as a "tap," a "tingle," "stimulation," "e-touch" or anything to obscure the fact that an electrical shock is being sent through the skin and nerves of the body.

The Physical Concerns

It is also possible for a shock collar to cause burns on a dog's neck. If the electrodes of the shock collar do not fully contact the skin, a spark may be produced and vaporize a small portion of tissue. In addition, the electrodes themselves are problematic — they may cause pressure necrosis and are often made of metal that is not hypoallergenic, causing contact dermatitis, or allergic reactions.

Note the pointed style of the electrodes on the model pictured. Having these push into a dog's soft neck produces discomfort, especially when worn for long periods of time.

Note the pointed style of the electrodes on this model. Having these push into a dog's soft neck area produces discomfort, especially when worn for long periods of time.



Additional physical dangers to the dog can also result from shock collars. Continuous shock can occur if a unit malfunctions and remains on. With electronic containment systems (invisible fences), a malfunctioning unit allows the dog to wander out of the electric fence area and into possible danger (traffic, other dogs, etc.). Even with a properly operating electronic fence, a sufficiently-motivated dog can run through it and may prevent it from returning to its yard. Shock-based fencing also fails to keep dangers (other animals) from coming into the dog's area.

The Psychological Concerns

Shock collars work by causing pain, resulting in fear. A study by Schilder and van der Borg (2004) concluded that shocks were in fact painful to dogs. More importantly, dogs that were shocked learned to associate the shock with the presence of their owners. Even when the shock collar was not being used, dogs continued to show body posture consistent with fear and anxiety – lip licks, lowered ear, tail and body positions, panting and more.

The use of shock collars as a training tool may also impede the dog's ability to learn and/or result in learned helplessness, a state in which all attempts to learn on the part of the dog stop.

The Ethical Concerns

The human side of the shock equation should be considered as well. Owner anger and frustration may result when the dog fails to perform as desired. This may cause the owner to apply increased intensity of punishment (higher shock levels). Some shock collar proponents advocate the simultaneous use of multiple shock collars – one on the neck and one on the groin. Body language stress signals may not be recognized by owners and ignored by “professionals” using shock collars, resulting in a higher-intensity shock for a dog that is already in pain. Finally, owners new to shock collars often defer to “professionals” regardless of their discomfort with their dog's reaction to being shocked. This deference to authority has been well-documented and demonstrated in Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority experiment of 1963.

Conclusion

All training should be conducted in a manner that encourages animals and their owners to enjoy training and become more confident and well-adjusted pets.

When searching for a trainer, ask questions! Find a trainer who encourages the use positive operant and respondent training methods, both personally and professionally.

Written by Jan Casey, Courteous Canine Inc. and The DogSmith Tampa. Copyright 2013.