

Send to printer Close window

Gentle Leashes Make Sense

Avoid Injuries and Ailments with Compassionate Choices

DR. PETER DOBIAS



Try this simple experiment: Open your hands, with both thumbs touching. Place your thumbs at the base of the throat with the fingers pointing back and surrounding the neck. Now, take a deep breath and as you squeeze your hands together, firmly pull your head backward. Now you have a good idea of how many dogs feel when they are on their leash.

If you are still keen to continue the experiment, fasten a choke chain around your neck and attach it to a leash. Then ask a friend to grab the end of the leash and jerk on it periodically. Or attach the chain to an extension leash and sprint until the leash runs out.

I do not recommend testing a prong collar or electric shock collar on yourself, but it's no wonder that dog collars regularly cause injuries and ailments that veterinarians treat in their offices. Common repercussions include:

aka retractable!

Whiplash-like injuries. Being jerked around on a leash is one cause of injuries similar to whiplash. Extension leashes add to the problem, because they encourage dogs to pull and to run faster before they reach the end of the line.

Ear and eye issues. When dogs pull on their leash, the collar restricts the blood and lymphatic fluid flow to and from the head. Clients are often perplexed when troubling ear and eye issues disappear after they switch from a dog collar to a proper harness.

Excessive paw licking and foreleg lameness. Leash pulling can impinge on the nerves in the front legs, which may lead to an abnormal sensation in the feet and cause dogs to lick them. These dogs are sometimes misdiagnosed as having allergic reactions.

Hypothyroidism (low thyroid gland hormone). High rates of thyroid troubles in breeds that frequently pull on the leash, such as Labrador retrievers and German shepherds, make sense when one understands that the collar pushes on the throat in the area of the thyroid gland and may traumatize it. Thyroid trauma can cause low energy, weight gain, skin problems, hair loss and an increased likelihood of ear infections and organ failure.

The best alternative to a collar is a harness, with the spot for a leash attachment at the front of the chest. This design distributes the pressure of tugs and jerks throughout the dog's entire body and keeps the neck and throat free of

pressure. Harnesses that have the leash attached on the back are not recommended, because pulling still restricts the front portion of the neck, thereby pressing on veins, arteries, nerves and energy channels.

Make sure to properly fit a dog's harness and carefully follow the maker's instructions. Ensure that the harness is not pressing or rubbing anywhere and that it is washed regularly. Employ the harness only when leash-walking and take it off when a dog is off-leash. Adequately train the animal so that he can be off the leash as much as possible.

A special note: If a dog is considered a puller, have his neck examined by a vet or animal chiropractor experienced in neck assessment. Consider getting his thyroid hormone levels checked and the neck and back examined for any sign of injury. Keep in mind that many veterinarians are not trained to evaluate spinal alignment, so do some homework to find the right practitioner.

After switching your own family to a gentle leash, pass on what you know to others. Whenever you see a dog pulling and choking on the collar, gather the courage to talk to the owner. Everyone will be glad you did.

Dr. Peter Dobias, a holistic veterinarian in Canada since 1988, sold his Vancouver practice in 2008 to dedicate himself to transforming the face of veterinary care with an emphasis on disease prevention. For more information, free webinars and a link to his Facebook page, visit PeterDobias.com.

We have been recommending Gentle Leaders for years for the medical reasons described within this handout (and because it works!). Interesting facts about the Gentle Leader:

- Designed by dog trainer Ruth Foster of Minneapolis and veterinarian Dr. Robert (R.K.) Anderson of Falcon Heights, MN.
- The Gentle Leader was named in July of 2002 as one of the by the Smithsonian Institution as one of the world's 100 best inventions. In 2003, Dr Anderson and his colleague Ruth E Foster were honored by the Smithsonian Institute by having their picture and their Gentle Leader invention featured in an exhibit of inventions such as Post It® notes and Velcro®.
- The pressure from choke chains or harnesses actually causes dogs to pull forward. That's how sled dogs work.
- Unlike traditional collars that press against the windpipe, the Gentle Leader is designed so that dogs that pull and lunge feel pressure on the back of their heads -- much as a pup would feel when carried by its mother.
- The American Veterinary Medical Association has recognized the Gentle Leader as a more humane approach in 2003.
- In 2005 the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals honored Dr. Anderson with the ASPCA Life Time Achievement Award (the Gentle Leader had much to do with this).