

Teaching Your Dog to Wear a Head Halter

A head halter, such as a Gentle Leader or Halti, is a tool used for walking dogs. It has a strap that fits around the back of the dog's head and another over the dog's muzzle, with the leash attaching to a strap under the chin.

Why use it?

A head halter can be useful to teach dogs not to pull on leash. It is often used for larger dogs because it offers a large amount of control due to its design. By attaching at the muzzle and under the neck, you have more control of your dog's head - and therefore where he is looking - than with a traditional collar or harness. For this reason, many people use head halters for their leash-reactive dogs.

Safety

The head halter is a powerful tool. Its design allows for more control with the use of very little pressure on the leash. When working with a head halter, it's important to be mindful of the force you are using and to remind yourself to work with soft hands.

Desensitization

Getting your dog used to the head halter before you ever start to use it on a walk is imperative. You want your dog to associate all good things with this tool. Do this by taking things slowly. Allow your dog to sniff at the leader and get a treat. Hold the harness up and allow your dog to poke at it with his nose while getting a treat. Hold the muzzle strap open and allow your dog to stick his nose through the opening to grab a treat that you're holding. Continue in this slow manner, only moving forward to the next step when your dog is totally comfortable. If at any point your dog seems scared, skittish, or is backing away and disengaging, give him a break. When you begin your practice again, start a few steps back from where you left off, making sure your dog is relaxed before moving forward.

Fitting

Once your dog is comfortably moving his nose in and out of the nose strap for a treat, you can begin the process of fitting your head halter. It's often helpful to have a partner give treats to the dog while you do the fitting.

Begin with all the straps loose and open - we don't want anything snug to start. Have your dog poke his nose through the muzzle for a treat. Allow him to lick on a cookie while you attach the clip around the back of the dog's head. Only keep it attached for a moment, then unclick and remove the halter, taking away the treat at the same time.

Repeat, being sure to treat the dog any time the halter is touching the dog and removing the treat when the halter is off. Each time you take off the harness, tighten the back strap (the strap that attaches at the back of the head) just a bit until you start to approach the appropriate fitting. You'll want this back strap tight - just loose enough to fit two fingers between the strap and your dog's head. Remember to keep each fitting short and positive.

Now that the head strap is fitted snugly and your dog is still feeling comfortable, it's time to tighten the lower strap. While your dog is being treated, gauge the appropriate fitting for the bottom strap. You want the strap to be loose enough for your dog to be able to eat, drink, or even hold a tennis ball in his mouth. A good way to tell if the fitting is correct is if the strap on top of your dog's nose can move forward and backward, but doesn't reach the start of the nose (where your dog's furry muzzle turns into nose) and stops just under his eyes.

Hold the material of the chin strap with your fingers at what you believe will be the appropriate size. Remove the halter (and the cookie) from your dog and move the plastic clamp on the strap under the chin up to the spot you measured with your fingers and secure the clamp. Place the entire halter on your dog again to ensure everything is correctly fitted and secure.

Next see if your dog will engage in play with his halter on. Keep these sessions short and all positive. Start with 30 seconds of treats or tug. When you remove the halter, all the fun stops. When you put the halter back on, the fun begins again. When your dog is able to comfortably wear his halter for short periods of time, you can then clip the leash onto the halter. Don't put any pressure on the leash just yet - the added weight from the leash can throw some dogs off.

Time for a quick walk

Once your dog is used to the weight of the leash, you can begin using your tool.

While walking your dog, if he begins to pull, stop and keep your hand planted at your waist.

When your dog looks back and lessens the tension on leash, praise and begin moving forward again.

It may take some practice for your dog to catch on to this new way to walk. Be consistent to help him learn!

Things to remember

Avoid using leash corrections. They send mixed signals to our dogs which can then confuse and frustrate both of us. Think of walking with your dog as working as a team, rather than a battle against each other.