

Adverse Effects of Punishment

Are you feeling frustrated because your dog won't stop pulling on leash or ignores you when you call? You might be tempted to purchase a prong collar or hire a trainer that uses an e-collar to get fast results. Before you make a decision, consider the risks.

Chain collars, prong collars, e-collars, and other "pet correction" devices are aversives used to punish your dog for doing something wrong. Research has shown that dogs learn best when they are rewarded for doing the right thing – not punished for "misbehaving." Along with being ineffective, using punishment in training can lead to negative results, such as an increase in fearful and/or aggressive behavior.¹

Common Issues with Using Aversives:

Your timing has to be perfect. Dogs learn through association. If your timing is off, the following could happen:

- Dog looks at you the moment you shock them. → Your presence stresses them. → Dog avoids you more often.
- Dog looks at another dog the moment you shock them. → Presence of other dogs causes stress. → Dog to dog aggression develops.
- Dog develops generalized anxiety from not knowing when a shock is coming. → Dog becomes anxious about the environment and remains in a constant state of stress.

The punishment needs to happen EVERY TIME the undesired behavior occurs. If it doesn't happen every time, the times when the punishment is not administered, the dog is actually receiving a reward.

Punishment is not instructive. It does not teach the dog what to do. Using a 'correction' may stop the behavior in that circumstance, but it doesn't teach your dog what to do differently going forward.

Punishment can strengthen an undesired behavior. Your dog may only respond to training when the aversive tool is present. The absence of the aversive becomes a reward for the undesired behavior. For example: you forget to put the prong collar on your dog; he pulls even more than before. He doesn't truly understand that you want him to walk on a loose leash and is also being rewarded for pulling.

The stress of the aversive can cause cortisol and stress hormones to rise and remain in your dog's bloodstream for up to 72 hours. As a result, other behavior issues may pop up. Your dog could become an unwilling participant in all training contexts because they believe all training is dangerous.

You may **damage your relationship with your dog.** Your dog may associate the punishment with you, especially because you are present when the punishment is delivered.

Using aversives to train is **just as rigorous** as using reward-based methods. **It's not a quick fix.** Many owners skip a lot of crucial steps in the training process, setting their dog up for failure.

Mistakes made with corrective training methods are very hard to undo. Punishment relies on a strong emotional state in order to be effective. Your dog could end up with generalized anxiety, increase in aggression or reactivity, a negative association with training, or a negative association with you. You could also physically injure your dog by accident.

Many owners end up having to use an **increasingly higher level of correction** (higher shock level, stronger yank on the leash) in order to get the desired response. This could be because the repeated exposure numbs the dog to the aversive. Eventually, your dog may completely shut down and become unresponsive.

Alternatives to Aversives

Use **positive reinforcement** to teach your dog what you'd like them to do. Positive reinforcement training means that you reward your dog as soon as they do something you like. The reward reinforces the behavior, making it more likely to occur again. Positive reinforcement is a powerful tool you can use to change your dog's behavior.²

If your dog doesn't come when called, **practice calling them for good things** – like treats and toys – in an environment with minimal distractions. Once they're responding indoors, **use a long line** to keep them safe while you practice recall outdoors or around distractions.

If you're struggling because your dog pulls on leash, try a **no-pull, front-attach harness**. This style of harness can help redirect your dog back to you when they pull and give you a better sense of control.

If your dog won't stop barking during your dinner party, **manage the situation**. Put your dog in a quiet spot away from the commotion, give him a long-lasting chew or Kong, and turn on some relaxing music.

Next Steps

Consider why the problem behavior is occurring before jumping to an aversive. All behavior is valid and has an underlying function. Is your dog experiencing fear, anxiety, stress? Are they frustrated or bored? Perhaps there's a dietary deficiency or even an underlying medical condition.

Seek professional help. If you're struggling with a problem behavior, we can help! Contact us for advice on what's an appropriate and effective way to discourage undesired behavior.

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.

¹To learn more about the effects of using punishment in animal training, read the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior's **Position Statement on Punishment:** avsab.org/resources/position-statements.

²For information about reward-based training, check out our handout, **Using Positive Reinforcement:** oregonhumane.org/training/pet-advice-help-line.