

LIFESTYLE

Head Halters Work on Dogs, Too!

■ A dog trainer's tip, control the head, control the dog. Head halters do trick.

Here in rural Santa Clarita, most of us are familiar with the sight of a horse wearing a head halter. Now, a horse can easily weigh a few hundred pounds, but I've never seen one wearing a choke chain. Have you? Yet somehow people still manage to move these magnificent beasts. Canine head halters are not as common. Though they have been around for years, many people are still not familiar with them.

The two most popular brands of canine head halter are Halti and Gentle Leader.

The Halti consists of a nylon loop that fits over the dog's muzzle, sewn to two nylon strips which encircle the head and snap together just beneath the dog's ears. The Gentle Leader is similar but has a thinner, lighter muzzle strip and straps which are attached to the muzzle piece but move independently of it, allowing a more customized fit. Both types have a small metal ring at the bottom of the muzzle piece that the leash attaches to. Since the leash attaches under the dog's chin, there is no pressure on the neck. The Halti is simpler to put on and requires minimal fitting. You simply

choose the right size for your breed. The Gentle Leader comes in various sizes, but requires the muzzle piece to be adjusted to fit your particular dog. This initial fitting takes a few moments, but the resultant customized fit is an advantage, as is the lighter muzzle strip, which is more easily accepted by many dogs. With either product, the muzzle piece allows dogs to yawn, bark, eat and do just about anything with it on that they could do with it off. In other words, it's not a muzzle!

There is usually an initial adjustment period for a dog to accept a head halter. Just as most dogs initially scratch and fuss at flat buckle collars, most don't love anything resting on their muzzle. I use lots of treats when conditioning it. Put the head halter on, treat, praise, pet, take it off. Repeat three times per day. Once the dog starts going for a walk each time the head halter is on, it will associate the two and the walk will become the reward.

The first time I ever used a head halter was with my own dog, Mojo. Mojo is a 120-pound Shepherd/Malamute mix. Since I don't weigh 120 soaking wet, it's not exactly a great balance of power. Although Mojo is

Nicole Wilde

Going to the Dogs



well trained, the boy's got a serious prey drive. If he sees a cat, all bets are off. I can tell you from experience if I were using anything other than a head halter, Mojo could pull me right off my feet. Head halters are like power steering!

There are a few theories on why head halters work. Premier, the company behind the Gentle Leader, suggests their product presses on an acupressure point at the back of the dog's skull, producing a calming effect. Another theory involves the dog's oppositional reflex. Simply put, this means when a dog is pulled in one direction, its instinct is to pull the other way. So if the head halter applies pressure against the back of the head, the dog will want to push back against it rather than pulling forward. Whatever the reason, head halters work. Unlike choke chains, there are no jerking "corrections". In fact, doing so might cause injury to your dog's neck. Instead, if the

dog pulls ahead, you simply stop walking. The momentum and design will cause the dog's head to turn back around toward you. Control the head, control the dog. No dog can exert the same amount of pressure on a head halter that they can on a flat collar, choke chain or pinch collar. Head halters allow smaller or physically weaker people to walk larger dogs. I use them exclusively when working with aggressive dogs. Believe me, when a 140-pound Rottweiler lunges at another dog, you want a head halter on it! The bottom line is, head halters make everyday walks more pleasant for everyone.

Keep in mind any collar is simply a tool, not a substitute for training. I suggest having a trainer who is familiar with head halters fit your dog for one and show you how to use it. Now, I realize if you're used to choke chains being the standard, the head halter may seem like an alien concept. Trust me, it's worth getting your mind around it and getting your dog used to it. Walks will become so much more pleasant that you'll take more of them, which will in turn result in a better behaved, more relaxed dog at home.

Nicole Wilde is a Santa Clarita Valley dog trainer.