

How to Keep Your Pooch From Pulling

By Wendy Krehbiel

Have you ever felt like your arms were longer after taking your dog from a walk? Have you ever found yourself lying on the pavement after a squirrel ran by while walking your dog?

Dogs pull on leash because it usually gets them to where they want to go – to the squirrel, to their favorite person, to another dog, to a good smell, to trash on the sidewalk, etc. Dogs also have something called “opposition reflex”. This reflex results in them pulling whenever pressure is put on their necks or chests. Humans have the same reflex. It is the reason why you don’t tip over when someone pushes you. Most dogs have a lot of practice pulling on a leash and getting to things they’d like to visit (or at least attempting to in the case of squirrels). Walking on leash is also difficult to teach because it is a behavior that we ask for over long periods of time. Most things we teach our dog require a single action – like sit or down. Walking on leash requires them to continue not pulling for the entire duration of the walk.

Teaching your dog to walk nicely on a leash can be a daunting training task. There are a few tools available that can reduce or prevent pulling with no training. My two favorite tools are the Gentle Leader™ and the Sense-ation Harness. Some people choose to use these tools for a lifetime, while others use them to be able to go for walks when they are not in “training mode” until their dog is able to walk nicely in any situation. There are other tools available that I do not recommend such as choke chains and prong collars that use physical punishment as a method to reduce pulling. These tools can result in injury to dog’s necks and windpipes and can also cause or amplify fear or aggression.

The Gentle Leader is a head halter for dogs made by Premier Pet Products. There is another brand – the Halti that works better on short nosed dogs such as boxers. Head halters have been used with horses for a very long time. Imagine putting a horse on a collar and leash and walking down the street! The halter fits over the nose and attaches behind the ears. The dog is able to pant, eat, drink and even bite (there is a common misconception that the head halter is a muzzle) while wearing a head halter. The leash then attaches underneath the dog’s chin. If the dog pulls, his head is turned back towards you – taking his focus off whatever he was pulling towards. Also, the only leverage for pulling is the muscles in the neck – they are unable to throw their whole weight into pulling. I have found that head halters virtually eliminate pulling in most dogs. This allows young children and elderly people to safely walk their dogs through any situation and can also make walks more pleasant for active adults – even when squirrels or other favorite things appear on your walk!

When you first introduce your dog to a head halter you might encounter some resistance. Make sure that you make their first introduction to the halter positive – feed them lots of treats while they are wearing it. Also, try to keep them from getting their head down to their feet to paw at it. Keep the first few sessions short. If your dog does not adapt to

wearing the halter within a few days, feel free to talk to staff at Downtown Dogs to get additional tips on helping your dog adjust to wearing the head halter.

The Sense-ation Harness is an anti-pull harness made by SofTouch Concepts. The harness fits over the dogs back and across their chest similar to a regular harness. The leash attaches to the harness on the front of the chest. This helps to prevent the dog from getting their full weight into pulling. The attachment on the front helps to turn them back towards you and reduces their leverage. Most dogs quickly accept this harness with little or no adverse reaction. I have found that this harness greatly reduces pulling; however it does not eliminate it to the extent of the Gentle Leader in most instances. This is a great option if you have a dog that does not pull forcefully or is having trouble adapting to the Gentle Leader.