

Behaviour Tips: *A trainer recommended a shock collar – what should I know?*

What are shock collars?

A shock collar is a device that delivers an electric shock of varying intensities when worn by a pet. Currently on the market there are remote controlled shock, anti-bark, and perimeter shock collars. This device is used to deliver an unpleasant “jolt”, even from a distance, to discourage dogs from engaging in unwanted behavior. For example, When a dog is not responding to their owner’s request, they are given one or more shocks until they comply.



Over the last several years,, the morality of shock collars has been the subject of serious debate, resulting in several national bans. We must consider if this training method is more effective than alternatives and if it has negative effects on animal welfare that could also harm the human-animal bond.

Shock collars can be detrimental to your dog’s physical and mental health

Because of the difference between the thickness of human and dog skin, the shock can appear to be harmless to humans when tested on themselves. Human skin is three times thicker than the dog’s so it is unreliable to conclude that the stimulus is not painful for the pet. Also, if the dog’s skin becomes moist, the shock velocity can increase. Therefore, while the shock setting can be adjusted, finding the right intensity of the stimulus for each dog is difficult and multiple attempts may be needed. Electric shocks can cause severe skin injuries due to inappropriately strong stimuli, and prolonged and unsupervised use of collars. The photo below shows severe skin bruising in a dog who was electrocuted from an anti-bark shock collar.



From KL Overall 2013, Clinical Behavioral Medicine for Dogs and Cats, Elsevier, used with permission.

Severe stress and pain can be the result of an improperly timed or inappropriately high-level shock. We can use the recognition of signals such as yawning, tail tucking between the legs, vocalization, tense body posture, paw lifting, lip licking, and body shaking to evaluate a dog’s level of stress or anxiety. When a shock is used during a training session, researchers have seen dogs exhibiting these signals. Therefore, we have proof that shock collars are a training tool that compromises canine mental health. Finally, knowing that those devices may cause pain, injuries and fear, alternative training methods are certainly a better choice for your dog’s welfare.

Shock collars can jeopardize the human-animal bond

For most people, the desire to get a pet is to form a nurturing human-animal bond. Training methods that use punishment, including shock collars, may interfere with that connection. Your pet may begin to associate your presence or even certain verbal

cues with the shock. Use of positive punishment, including shock collars, may result in your dog exhibiting signs of fear around you, such as a low body posture. Owners have even reported that using a painful stimulus, such as a shock, resulted in the dog displaying more aggressive behaviors. In comparison, studies have demonstrated that animals have a more stable relationship with their owner if positive reinforcement is used, meaning training with rewards or treats. Research has shown that training with a shock collar can damage the bond you have with your pet and even make subsequent training sessions more difficult.

Shock collars are *not* the most effective training method

Shock collars are not more effective in improving canine behavioral problems when compared to reward-based training methods. One study showed that dogs who were training with positive reinforcement learned better and responded more accurately than dogs trained with shock, even when the companies selling shock collars provided the trainers. Another study concluded that shock collars are not recommended to correct behavioral issues since they do not address the underlying cause. They may also inadvertently suppress one behavior in exchange for another, for example decreasing barking with an anti-bark collar in cases of separation anxiety which may instead lead to destructive habits.

The potential for owners to incorrectly deliver a shock or collars to randomly fire on their own can lead to impediments to training. If the painful stimulus is applied too late after an undesirable behavior has occurred, the dog can become more fearful. In addition, inaccurate and negative associations between the shock and the dog’s actions unrelated to the problematic behavior can develop. If the shock intensity is too high, the dog’s ability to learn may be compromised as a result of pain, fear and learned helplessness (dog gives up because of a loss of control). Reports of these negative outcomes are even more common among novice users of these devices.

Alternative training methods to using a shock collar

Given that shock collars are a form of punishment, are not more distress when used and can cause serious injuries to dogs and potentially their owners, they present significant welfare concerns.

The following are safer, alternative methods of training that have been shown to be effective in correcting undesirable behaviors. Consult your local veterinarian to learn more.

- Positive reinforcement training (reward-based training) with play, food and praise. Punishment tells you what not to do. Positive reinforcement tells you what to do and provided accurate information about what is desired.
- Formal training classes.
- Puppy manners and social skills classes.
- Classical counterconditioning (changing a pet’s attitude or feelings towards a stimulus/object with rewards which creates a more positive association with that stimulus).

We recommend discussing any behavioral or training concerns about your pet with your local veterinarian and if you are still experiencing difficulties, a referral with a behavior specialist service may be required, such as the AVC Behavioral Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upe.ca).