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Dog Behavior Problems – Elizabethan Collars

What is a surgical collar, and when is one used?

Sometimes it is necessary to use a special type of collar to prevent your pet from attacking a particular area (e.g., a wound or bandage dressing). They take two forms: Elizabethan collars and tubular collars.

"When the animal turns its head, it is unable to touch any area of its body with its mouth."

Tubular collars are only available for use with certain sizes of pet. They consist of a semi rigid neck device that works by encasing the neck so the animal cannot turn round and reach the affected area. They are very effective at stopping some pets from turning and chewing at an area, but in others they do not work at all. The fit and comfort are essential.

Elizabethan collars (also known as Buster collars) are large plastic cone-shaped structures that are placed around the pet's neck and head. They extend forward so the wider edge extends beyond, or is level with, the end of the animal's muzzle. Thus, when the animal turns its head it is unable to touch any area of its body with its mouth. If your pet has had surgery on its ears, these collars are often used because they also protect the head from being scratched by the paws.

Are there any special precautions I need to follow when I use one of these collars?

You should always check that the collar is comfortable and not causing any soreness by rubbing. It is also essential that your pet cannot slip the collar off. It may take your pet a little time to adjust to wearing the collar and it may initially struggle. Do not be alarmed by this but stay with him and try to encourage him to relax. You should try to avoid taking the collar off when your pet is struggling as this teaches it to struggle in order to get its way and to get it off. This will encourage your dog to continue struggling when you try again.



"The shape of the cone amplifies any noise while eliminating the ability to locate its direction."

With both types of collars it is easier to frighten your pet, as senses are restricted to some degree. You should therefore make sure that anyone approaching your pet talks to him as they do so, to warn him of the approach.

If a tubular collar is used, your pet may be aware that it cannot turn its head and detect things quite so easily. It is not surprising that some pets may appear a bit restless and unwilling to settle. This happens because the pet finds it easier to keep a watch on the environment when standing and able to turn the whole body towards any stimulation.

Elizabethan collars may have several effects on your pet's behavior because the cone not only restricts the field of vision to the sides and above, but the shape of the cone amplifies any noise while eliminating the ability to locate its direction. It may take your pet a little time to adjust to this. In the meantime, your dog may be a little jumpy. Anyone approaching your pet must be warned of this, as a frightened dog may snap first and investigate later. Some dogs may learn to use the rim of the collar to rub against the area supposedly being protected; you should watch for this and notify your veterinarian if you spot him doing this. A different sized collar may be required.

It is important to make sure that your dog can drink with the collar on. It is not normally necessary to take the collar off while your pet eats. However, you may wish to raise the bowl up or fix it to a platform to allow him to do this more easily.

"It is easier for your dog to adapt to wearing the collar the whole time."

You should exercise your dog on a leash with the collar on, unless instructed otherwise. Never allow your dog to go outdoors unsupervised while wearing an Elizabethan collar. There is at least one incident of a dog wearing an Elizabethan collar that was scavenging and got its head stuck in a plastic bag with fatal consequences. Never leave your dog unsupervised without the collar on. Remember it only takes a split second for the dog to damage the area being protected. Also it is easier for your dog to adapt to wearing the collar the whole time than to have to keep adjusting to it being on, then off, and then on again.

Are there any other alternatives to these collars?

Your veterinarian will have chosen to use the collar after considering the alternatives like the use of a muzzle, sedatives or the application of foul tasting substances to the area to be protected. If you feel that the collar is not working or that one of these other alternatives might be just as effective and preferable for your pet, you should discuss this with your veterinarian.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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