

# How To Stop A Dog From Pulling On The Lead



 **HAIRY DOG  
MARKETING**

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Most owners of new puppies are unaware that their new cute arrival is learning from the minute it sets foot in their home. Puppies learn continuously and it's important to ensure that they learn what you want them to learn. Every time a puppy scratches at the door and you open it, it is learning.... The

result could be that in six months' time when you shut the dog out the room, it damages your door. Every time your puppy barks when it wants to come in and you let him in, you are teaching him that barking when he is left alone is the way to get attention, and then it becomes a habit....



The same happens when we first train our puppies to walk on the lead...

# Why do dogs pull?

## **There are two main reasons why dogs pull:**

1. We have inadvertently trained them to pull.

The main reason why dogs pull is because pulling on the lead is self-rewarding.

In your dog's head, as soon as she leave the house, they want to get in front of you to sniff everything, so they pull – AND THEY GET THERE!! When you are walking up the drive towards the gate, they want to be out of the gate as soon as possible so they pull forwards – AND THEY GET THERE! Once you are out walking, they want to get to the field where you let them off as soon as possible, so they pull – AND THEY GET THERE! And even better, they get let off the lead for a good run. Do you see the pattern? As soon as they see another dog, they want to go and say hello, so they pull towards the dog – AND THEY GET THERE. We inadvertently train our dogs to pull without even realising it. We reward their pulling by taking them where they want to go.

Dogs usually get into this habit when they are young puppies without much strength, when pulling is not a problem. After just a few weeks of walks, they have trained themselves to pull, and they are so convinced that this is the only way to do things that they don't even mind that it hurts their neck or almost chokes them. It gets them to where they want to go, so it's worth it!

## **The Oppositional Reflex**

Dogs also pull due to a subconscious reflex called the "oppositional reflex". When part of the dog's body is pulled in one direction, the body will lean or even strain in the opposite direction to maintain balance. When the dog pulls, we pull back, and the cycle is maintained...





## **Dangers Of Pulling**

### **Injuries to the dog**

Pulling on a flat collar and lead can cause a number of injuries, many of which you or your vet may not even realise are due to the pulling.

a.        **Neck injuries.**

Just one incident of running the full length of the lead then reaching the end and being yanked backwards could cause bruising, whiplash, headaches, crushed trachea, damage to larynx, and fractured vertebrae. The longer the lead, the worse the injuries could be, potentially with permanent or even fatal injuries.

b.        **Damage to the thyroid gland leading to hypothyroidism.**

Dr Peter Dobias, a doctor of veterinary medicine, wrote about hypothyroidism caused by pulling on the lead in an article published in

December 2018. (<https://peterdobias.com/blogs/blog/11017353-one-jerk-can-cause-a-lot-of-damage>) He had often wondered why dog breeds renowned for pulling, such as Labradors, golden retrievers and German shepherd dogs, also had higher rates of thyroid problems. He realised that the dog's collar rests right where the thyroid gland is located. When dogs pull, the thyroid gland becomes inflamed and is attacked and destroyed by the dog's own immune system. This damage causes a deficit of thyroid hormone and is termed "hypothyroidism". The symptoms include weight gain, a lack of energy, hair loss and skin problems.

c. Ear and eye issues

Pauli AM, Bentley, E Diehl, KA, Miller, PE investigated eye pressure of dogs in their study 'Effects of the application of neck pressure by a collar or harness on intraocular pressure in dogs'. They found that pressure inside the eye was significantly increased when pressure was applied to a dog's neck from its collar. Increased eye pressure can create additional problems for dogs already suffering thin corneas, glaucoma, or eye injuries.

Pulling on the lead can also affect the blood and lymphatic flow to and from the head, which can cause issues with the eyes or ears, which some studies have even linked to cancer.\*\*

Additionally, dogs with collar and lead injuries that have damaged their upper cervical spine are particularly prone to ear scratching or even severe ear infections.

d. Damage to the nerves in the neck that go down to the paws.

The nervous system in the front legs leading down to the feet can be damaged, causing a sensation that the dog doesn't recognise and can lead to symptoms such as paw licking, scratching the "armpits" or foreleg lameness. Paw licking is often misdiagnosed as allergies when in fact it is excessive pulling on the lead that is causing the issues.

e. Epilepsy or seizures.

Pulling on the neck increases pressure on the jugular vein. This can cause a build-up of pressure around the brain or can affect the flow of cerebral-spinal fluid, either of which can lead to epilepsy in pre-disposed dogs.

## **Other Dangers Of Pulling**

### a. Injuries to the owner or others

We often hear from owners of large dog breeds with serious arm or back injuries due to their over-excitabile companions. There is also the risk that large breeds could pull you over, get free and cause injury to others or cause a road traffic accident by running onto the road.

### b. Embarrassment

The internet is loaded with requests for help from dog owners who are about at their wit's end due to their embarrassing pets. They feel like they are the laughing stock of their training class because they are being dragged round and are unable to regain control.

### c. The dog doesn't get walked at all

Due to all of the concerns above, some owners find that they don't take their dogs out as often as they should because walking them is no longer a pleasure and is an unpleasant, exhausting and often a humiliating and dangerous experience.

## **Dealing With Pulling On The Lead**

We've established why most dogs pull on the lead. We know that in most cases we have inadvertently taught them to do so by rewarding their pulling behaviour. We also know that once they start to pull, we are essentially pulling back just by holding the end of the lead. This means that the oppositional reflex kicks in and they pull even more. We are in an endless cycle of pulling that seems impossible to break.

However, pulling is NOT an impossible habit to break. It just takes determination, consistency and a lot of patience.

## **Training Your Dog Not To Pull**

Once your dog has got into the habit of pulling on the lead, then you will need to consider not only how you will train him not to pull, but also how you will exercise him during the period in which you are training him. Training a dog not to pull on the lead is time-consuming and it's important that you are consistent. Therefore, you will need to ensure that he is not walked on his normal collar and lead unless you are confident that he won't pull. All your hard work will be wasted if he is allowed to pull and get where he wants to go.

It's for this reason that people often use headcollars or harnesses to manage the pulling while they are training the dog, and this is how we recommend the k9 bridle is used.

## **Training Methods**

There are a few different methods of training that are successfully used to train dogs to walk on the lead. With all methods it is important to only walk the dog when he is in a calm state of mind. Don't leave the house until he had calmed down, even if it does take 15 minutes or longer. Setting off with him like a coiled spring is setting him up for failure. Some trainers recommend walking the dog first (off-lead or using a management tool such as a harness or headcollar) then training using the following method after the walk when the dog has calmed down.

We carried out an online poll to find out how people have trained their dogs to walk on the lead without pulling. The following methods are the five most recommended by other owners.

## **1. Teach the dog the heel position**

When training a dog, you need to think like your dog thinks.... And understand what motivates him. This may be a toy, food or both. Therefore, training a dog to think that being by your side is the most wonderful place to be needs to involve food or a toy. If there are other distractions then the food needs to be high value food, such as cheese or sausage, or a very high value toy. Tug toys tend to work best because then both owner and dog can play with the toy, then the owner takes it back. The lab is never able to go off with the toy, letting all the excitement wind down.

### **a. Start at home**

There are few other distractions in the home so the dog is more able to concentrate. Choose the side you would like your dog to walk on and stick to that side. In the UK we usually train our dogs to walk on the left but it can be either side.

Lure the dog to your side using food and give him the food when he is sitting in the correct position. It can help to train near a wall so that the dog is positioned in between you and the wall. This will keep him close to you without you having to pull him close. Pulling the dog towards you using a lead will induce the oppositional reflex and lead to him pulling away from you, which we definitely don't want. When the dog is reliably getting into the heel position, you can start to use whatever command you want to use for keeping him at your side. Most people use "heel". I use the word "walk" because I want my dogs to walk at my side and not run off. I can then use this when the dog is on or off the lead.

Once the dog is proficient at this stage, move on to taking just a couple of steps. If the dog stays in the correct position, which he should after only a few steps, reward him. Gradually build this up so that you are taking more steps each time. If your dog pulls forwards, then ignore it and he doesn't get the treat or toy. He will soon work out that to get the treat, he needs to stay close to your side.



### **b. Start again in the garden**

Once he can do a few laps round the living room, try carrying out the same exercise outside.

Start with him sitting by your side again, preferably against a wall, and build up the number of steps gradually, just as you did in the house.

Remember, never reward the dog unless he is in the correct position. By training in this way and building up the number of steps gradually, it should be easy for him to be correct and be rewarded. If he moves out of position, go back to just a few steps and work up to more very gradually again.

### **c. Change the reward frequency**

Once the dog is walking to heel reliably in the garden, change the reward system so that the rewards are random and he doesn't get a treat every time you praise him. Dog behaviour theory has shown that feeding a treat every time the dog does something right can actually lower the value of the reward. Making it intermittent keeps the dog's interest and makes him more likely to keep trying. (Think here of our own motivation to play on slot machines for a low value prize, such as a cuddly toy. People will spend hours and pounds trying to win a cuddly toy and enjoy the process much more than going into a shop and buying the same item for considerably less money!).

### **d. Move the training onto a quiet street**

Once he is walking nicely to heel in the garden, start training outside the garden in a quiet street where there are as few distractions as possible. This is where very high value food will be useful to ensure that the food is more interesting than any other distractions. Again, start with the sit and build up the number of steps gradually.

### **e. Continue training in areas with more distractions**

Eventually progress to locations where there are more and more distractions. Extremely high value (garlic sausage or smelly cheese) rewards

are definitely a must – your reward has to be more exciting than the environment. He needs to want that treat more than anything else around him.

If your dog likes toys rather than treats then use high value toys that you save for special occasions that he finds particularly exciting.

When you pass something very distracting such as another dog, a friendly person or a butcher's shop, get him used to coming to you for his treat rather than wanting to go off to see the dog or person.

#### **f. Only reward when he is in the correct position**

If the dog does start pulling, stop, remind him of the command you have chosen to use to keep him by your side and reward him when he gets into the correct position. He must never get to where he wants to go by pulling. He needs to learn that pulling won't get him anywhere but walking nicely on the lead will get him to where he wants to go AND earn him a nice treat along the way.



#### **Owner Tip**

“You need to consider lead training as a formal training session. It can't really take place on a walk - the dog will practice pulling and undo all your hard work. You have to take your dog on training sessions and always best after a nice long walk so they are already a bit walked-out and not so eager

to see and sniff and run.

Load up your pockets with lots and lots and lots of small treats (the pocket on the same side as the dog). They should be small enough to eat in one go. You will need loads. Practice palming the treat from your pocket to your dog's mouth without stopping your walk, pausing or turning back.

Position your dog where you want her to be, take a step forward and as she steps with you, treat. On each stride, treat and stride at the same time. If she moves forward or back or to the sides, just keep going but don't treat OR stop and wait for the dog to come back to your side. I used to use a heel command to call Ruby back to my side but that's cos we had already taught her to heel walk. Stride forward but don't treat until the SECOND stride forward - this stops the dog from being a yoyo puller - coming back for a treat, pulling and then coming back for a treat.

I used counting to assist me. So at the start, I used to treat for each stride. Then each second stride and then each third. Don't move to the next level until you are confident that the break in between treats will not mean your dog is running off. Yes, I did look a right wally walking along counting and treating but that was the only way to make sure that I progressed with her but not too fast.

At no point should the dog be crossing over you or falling behind or pulling. It takes loads of patience but it's really really worth it. I can now hold the lead very loosely in my left hand and walk along with her trotting nicely next to me. It makes for much nicer and more pleasant walks for all of us."

## **2. The Loose Lead Method**

There are lots of different versions but they all work on the same principle. The dog is taught that pulling will NOT get him where he wants to go. As soon as the lead goes tight, the handler does one of the following:

- An about turn and walks in the opposite direction
- Stops until the lead goes slack

- Stops and calls the dog back to heel then rewards
- Stops and makes the dog sit
- Does a figure of eight then continues onwards

Some dogs will learn more quickly than others but they WILL learn so long as the handler is consistent and ensures that the dog is never rewarded for pulling by allowing him to go in the direction he is pulling.

There is no real need to reward the dog when using this method because the reward is in the going forward when he has stopped pulling.

Owner tips:

“I use the stop and change direction. Freya was a shocking puller (in a hurry to get to the woods or loch). She was always much better on return journey. After 4 weeks of pavement lead walks (and lots of surprised praise from me), during her season, she is vastly improved.”

“Every time mine pulled, she had to sit, and it didn't take her long to work it out.”

“Figure of eight turns work for guide dog puppies. Soon get the hang of it, if they pull we get nowhere.”

“Always found using a small water pistol (child's toy) has been very effective just a quick squirt on the back - gentle and kind - just makes them think 'what was that??' Told about it by vets nurses at puppy playgroup years ago - always recommend it as it doesn't hurt them and it soon stops any pulling.”

### **3. The Slip Lead Method**

This is the method traditionally used for training gundogs.

Slip lead training involves using a quick “correction” by giving a very quick,



sharp pull on the slip lead then immediately releasing. The lead must be put on the dog correctly according to the side that you dog will walk. If it's not correctly fitted, it will not release, causing discomfort to the dog and will not be successful.

This method involves correcting the dog, as opposed to the other two methods that concentrate on rewarding the dog for behaving correctly or being in the correct position. However, you have to weigh up what feels right for you and a quick check every so often is probably safer for the dog than long walks of pulling on the lead with all the damage that can do to his neck.

The following video demonstrates the use of this technique.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSUv5iC-VWQ>

#### **4. The Stick Method**

The stick method. This was suggested by a few respondents to our surveys and they swear by it. The handler carries a stick of some description while



walking the dog and waves it just in front of where they want the dog to be. The dog will choose not to walk into the stick and therefore maintains the heel position. He is then rewarded.

## **5. The Tube of Cheese Spread Method**

This is a similar theory to the stick method but a tube of cheese spread is the stick and dog is rewarded periodically with a small squeeze of the tube! Or something nice is smeared on the end of the stick that the dog is allowed to lick when in the correct position.

Once the dog is walking nicely, the tube/stick can just be carried and used if the dog does surge forward and eventually it can be dispensed of altogether.

Owner tips:

“Dog and tube of cheese spread in left hand, lead in right hand. Dab nose gently and they don't move from your side. The tube gives extra length to your arm so you're not bending as much. Not long before just the tube goes out then eventually just odd kibble treat and then not need anything. They walk beautifully after that.”

“With some trepidation I set off on Ruby's walk today - first dry day in ages so knew it would be busy - armed with a tube of cheese spread!

I let her have a little lick and then called her back to me for some more maybe half a dozen times and apart from one slip up she didn't run off to greet anyone. Have finally found a treat that excites her more than other dogs. At one point she was all set to spring off and the words "what's this" stopped her in her tracks in an instant and we walked away with her licking at the tube for a few paces.”

Other methods suggested by respondents:

- “Give up and accept she is going where she wants.”

- “Cheese!”

## **Managing the pulling**

It’s important that your dog is never allowed to pull on the lead and get to where he wants to go during the period in which you are training him not to pull. This would undo any training that you’ve carried out up to that point. Therefore, if you need to take the dog out anywhere and, for whatever reason, you are unable to keep up the training, you will need a way of managing the pulling.

People can be very judgemental about using apparatus to manage pulling behaviour, such as suggesting that the dog should be trained instead, but it’s not that simple. Training can take weeks or even months and your dog needs walking in the meantime. It’s essential that you’re able to control your dog, especially if he is stronger than you.

There are two types of apparatus that can be used to control pulling: headcollars or harnesses.

## **Headcollars**

There are a number of different headcollar brands, and are somewhat successful in stopping dogs pulling on the lead.

However, the problems with many headcollar brands currently available are:

- They tend to pull into the dog’s eyes
- They often cover the mouth and can interfere with the dog’s breathing or make it more difficult for them to play with toys
- The point of control is under the chin, meaning that when the dog pulls, its head is pulled sideways. This is particularly dangerous if the dog runs to the end of the lead repeatedly, and is yanked back, causing spine or neck injuries.

- They are not always easy to get a perfect fit so they rub the dog's skin
- They stay tight all the time, whether the dog pulls or not. The dog is therefore not learning anything.

## **The K9 Bridle**

Having seen so many dogs in headcollars covering their eyes, heads pulled sideways, looking miserable and depressed, we wanted to find something different.

There are five very good reasons why the k9 bridle is more effective, safer and more comfortable than other headcollars:

1. The point of control is at the back of the head meaning that the dog's neck is protected from injury and the spine is kept in line.
2. The k9 bridle releases as soon as the dog stops pulling, giving the dog signals it can understand. This makes it ideal for assisting owners to train their dogs.
3. The very soft, lightweight tubular material with which the bridle is made has no hard edges that may rub on the dog's skin and cause sore places.
4. The bridles come in 5 different sizes. Each size is fully adjustable so it's possible to get a perfect fit for your dog, meaning there is no rubbing or chafing.
5. The bridle can help to control aggression because the effect of dipping the nose slightly when a command is given breaks eye contact between dogs, giving the owner the opportunity to move away before the dog can exhibit any aggression.



### **Professional opinion about headcollars**

Dog trainers are divided about the use of headcollars in dogs. Some don't like the fact that a few dogs don't like the sensation of having something over their nose and will fight to get the headcollar off. It must feel strange to the dog that is unfamiliar with anything going over his head, but most headcollars do not hurt. It is just an unfamiliar sensation. This can be avoided with gentle training where the dog is introduced to the headcollar gradually at the same time as playing with the owner, being rewarded with treats or praise or just having the headcollar on before being fed. In this way, the dog associates the headcollar with nice things, is not scared by it and is much less likely to show any other signs of irritation or distress.

As with all dog restraints, if headcollars are not fitted correctly, or if the dog has thin fur or skin and is a very strong puller, occasionally the collars can rub on the dog's face causing sore places if unmonitored. This very occasionally occurs with K9 bridles and if it happens, we will provide a bespoke version with a softer, thicker noseband that usually alleviates the problem.

Owner tip:

"I have had 4 labs all had puppy training and good on collar and leads until 6

months then they go through a teenage phase and pull despite treats and short lead so on to a headcollar until they settle down.”

## Harnesses



There are three types of harness available:

1. **Back-fastening harnesses** where the lead attaches to the back of the harness. These are generally not good for stopping dogs from pulling.
2. **Front-fastening harnesses** where the lead attaches to the front of these harnesses, somewhere on the chest. These are somewhat successful in stopping dogs pulling.

However, as with all no-pull management apparatus, there can be issues with the front-attaching harness:

- When the dog pulls, the harness twists to the side.
- Some studies have demonstrated that a dog's gait or movement is



affected by harnesses, particularly those with straps across the chest at the top of the dog's legs.

- Front-attaching harnesses do not help with dog aggression or reactivity issues.
- The lead can easily get tangled up in the dog's legs if it is allowed to go too slack.
- These harnesses are not suitable if you take your dog running, as swinging the dog round to face you mid-flight could cause injury.
- Dogs can work out how to escape from harnesses unless they are fitted really well.
- Some front-fitting harnesses will "lift" the dog, helping the handler to get better control of the dog by taking the power away from the shoulders. Unfortunately, some dogs get into the habit of standing up on their hind legs and lunging forwards.
- If not fitted correctly they can chafe and cause sore places.

### **3. Front- and back-fitting harnesses**

These are used with a double ended lead, giving the handler more control over the dog's head as well as his body.

See our article "Headcollars Versus Harnesses"

Headcollars and harnesses used together

When a harness on its own doesn't work, some handlers will use a headcollar as well, giving them more choice about the type of restraint they use on the dog. This can be very successful with extremely strong or reactive dogs.

## Conclusion

We hope that this study has helped. We have examined why dogs pull, why it's dangerous to allow them to continue to do so and we've looked at the different options that dog owners are using to successfully control their dogs' pulling.

Despite most people being aware that training the dog to walk on the lead is the best option, in the fast pace of life these days, this is not always possible. Dogs are frequently family pets and families have busy lives. Dogs and owners come with their own set of circumstances and everyone has different priorities.

Many owners use headcollars or harnesses to control their dogs' pulling and there is nothing wrong with this. If it means that you are avoiding all the risks of pulling to your dog and yourselves and your dog gets the exercise it needs, that's all that matters.

If you do decide to train your dog, we've listed the five methods that owners and trainers have successfully used and recommended. We've gone through the basics here but there is a lot more information available online.

Thank you to everyone that responded to our polls, thank you for reading and good luck with your dogs!