

Collar vs. Harness – What's Best for Your Dog?

These walking gears each have their own benefits and drawbacks, and choosing the right one for your pet can make or break their comfort and safety. Here's how to find the best fit for your dog's needs.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Choosing between collars and harnesses makes all the difference in safety, comfort and control during walks with your dog. You need to consider your pet's breed, size, behavior and health when selecting the most appropriate walking gear for them
- Collars and harnesses differ in fit and distribution of pressure across your dog's body. Collars fit snugly around the neck, while harnesses distribute pressure across the chest and shoulders
- Collars are convenient and versatile but can cause neck strain, especially for breeds prone to tracheal damage or dogs that pull on leashes
- Harnesses offer better control, safety and reduced neck strain, but require proper fit to prevent chafing or restricted movement
- Many pet parents find using both a collar or harness, depending on the activity, offers the best of both worlds instead of making an either-or decision

Walking your dog is one of the joys of pet ownership, but choosing the right gear can be challenging with all the options available. Collars and harnesses have their pros and cons, and what you ultimately decide to use can have a big impact on safety, comfort and control. Whether you're a new pet parent or considering a change for your dog's comfort and safety, this article will help you navigate the differences, benefits and drawbacks of collars and harnesses.

Key Differences Between Collars and Harnesses

The biggest difference between collars and harnesses lies in how they fit and distribute pressure. Collars encircle your dog's neck, which makes them perfect for holding ID tags and leashes during light walks. They come in a variety of styles, from flat collars to martingale options, depending on your needs.

Harnesses, on the other hand, wrap around your dog's chest and shoulders, distributing pressure over a larger area of their body. They also come in different designs — back-clip, front-clip or even dual-clip — offering varying levels of control.¹

Every dog is unique, so the decision between a collar and a harness depends on your dog's specific needs. Consider these factors:²

- **Size and breed** — Small dogs or toy breeds prone to tracheal issues benefit from harnesses, while larger dogs may find collars more comfortable for casual use.

- **Behavior** — If your dog pulls on the leash or is reactive to stimuli, a harness can provide better control and safety. Calm, well-trained dogs might do fine with a collar.
- **Health** — Dogs with respiratory conditions, neck injuries or a history of tracheal collapse should use a harness to avoid additional strain on their neck.

The Pros and Cons of Collars and How to Choose the Right One

Collars are a staple because they are convenient, versatile, and allow for easy identification. They're lightweight and unobtrusive, meaning your dog can wear one all day without discomfort if it fits properly. For dogs that don't pull or lunge on the leash, a collar provides an efficient way to maintain control during short walks.³

Despite their convenience, collars come with risks, particularly for dogs that pull or lunge. This strain on the neck can lead to tracheal collapse in small breeds like Yorkshire Terriers or Pomeranians, while larger dogs may experience thyroid damage or cervical spine issues over time.⁴

Collars also pose a strangulation hazard if they catch on to objects, and in multi-dog households, rough play can result in tangling or injury. Ensuring a snug but not overly tight fit can help minimize these risks. To avoid these issues, always ensure your dog's collar is properly fitted. Rotating between a few collars can also prevent irritation or skin problems.⁵

Selecting the right collar goes beyond choosing one that looks cute. Here are other factors you need to consider:

- **Proper fit** — You should be able to slip two fingers comfortably between the collar and your dog's neck (or one finger for smaller breeds). Avoid collars that are too loose, as they increase the risk of tangling or slipping off, or too tight, which may cause irritation or injury.
- **Material** — Choose soft, flexible materials like nylon, leather or neoprene to prevent irritation. Avoid stiff or abrasive materials.
- **Breakaway feature** — For dogs that spend time unsupervised or in environments with potential hazards, a breakaway collar adds an extra layer of safety by releasing under pressure if it gets caught on something.

Selecting Harnesses — A Safer Option for Some Dogs

Harnesses have become a popular alternative to collars, as they offer more control and distribute pressure away from the neck, making them a safer and more versatile option, especially for dogs who tend to pull on their leashes and those at risk of respiratory issues like French bulldogs and Boston terriers.

Harnesses are also ideal for training because they offer better control; front-clip options, in particular, help redirect pulling behavior and encourage polite leash walking. Another major advantage is the added security harnesses provide. Dogs with narrow heads, like Whippets, are far less likely to slip out of a properly fitted harness than a collar. For elderly dogs or those recovering from injuries, a harness offers gentle support during walks, supporting their mobility without added strain.

However, while harnesses are safer in many ways, they're not without drawbacks. Improper fit can lead to chafing, discomfort or even restricted movement. A poorly designed harness might impede your dog's natural gait, causing long-term musculoskeletal issues. Some dogs find harnesses burdensome, particularly if they're not introduced to it

gradually.

Harnesses are also less convenient for quick trips or if you're in a rush. They require careful adjustment to ensure a proper fit, and poorly constructed ones may not hold up under regular use, particularly for active or strong dogs.^{6,7}

So, when choosing a harness, focus on safety, durability and a design that complements your dog's natural movement. Try the harness on your dog before purchasing if possible, or carefully follow sizing guides when ordering online. Here are some key considerations:

- **Adjustability** — Look for a harness that has multiple adjustment points to ensure it fits snugly without restricting movement or chafing your dog's skin.
- **Freedom of movement** — The harness should allow full shoulder and leg motion without pressing into the back of the legs or ribcage.
- **Durability** — Opt for high-quality materials with reinforced stitching. Padded options are particularly helpful for preventing irritation during longer walks or for dogs with short coats.

Additional Tips for Safe and Stress-Free Walks

Ensuring your dog's safety and comfort during walks isn't just about choosing the right gear — it's also about using it correctly. Whether you opt for a collar, harness or both, proper usage and maintenance are essential for preventing accidents and ensuring your dog's well-being. Here are some practical tips to help you get the most out of your dog's gear:^{8,9}

- **Check the fit regularly** — Dogs grow and their bodies change shape over time, whether it's a growing puppy or an adult dog that gains or loses weight. Regularly adjust collars and harnesses to ensure they remain snug but not too tight
- **Inspect for damage** — Worn straps, frayed edges or broken buckles can fail when you least expect it, putting your dog at risk of injury or escape. Routinely inspect your gear and replace it immediately upon noticing signs of wear or damage.
- **Introduce your dog to the gear gradually** — If your dog is new to a harness or collar, take the time to let them explore it at their own pace. Use treats and positive reinforcement to build a positive association, especially if they seem hesitant or uncomfortable at first.
- **Remove collars during play** — Rough play with other dogs can turn dangerous if collars get caught on teeth, jaws or limbs. To prevent accidents, remove collars during playtime, especially when dogs are wrestling or running together.
- **Provide your pet with identification** — Even if your dog primarily uses a harness, always make sure they have a secure form of identification. ID tags, combined with a microchip, provide peace of mind in case your dog ever gets lost.

Keep in mind that many pet parents find using both a collar and harness, depending on the activity, offers the best of both worlds. Choosing between them doesn't have to be an either-or decision. The key is to prioritize fit, comfort and safety. With the right gear, you and your pup can enjoy stress-free walks and make the most of your time together.

^{1,2,3} [AKC, June 28, 2024](#)

^{4,5,7} [PetMD, January 16, 2018](#)

⁶ [AKC, February 16, 2022](#)

⁸ [All Dogs Gym and Inn, March 27, 2023](#)

⁹ [The Environmental Blog, November 1, 2024](#)
