The Facts About Modern Electronic Training Devices

Today's technology is surprisingly subtle, more effective

"We recognize that older products were often unreliable and difficult to use humanely. But we feel that new technology employed by responsible manufacturers has led to products that can be and are being used safely and effectively to preserve the safety and well-being of many dogs and strengthen the bond with their human companions."[1]

— Randall Lockwood, PhD
Vice President for Research
and Educational Outreach
The Humane Society
of the United States

In the 30 years since the first "shock collars" became widely available in the United States, these increasingly popular behavioral training products have been refined to produce more effective results in ways that have proven not only to be humane, but also—in fact—gentle.

While the technology behind modern electronic training devices has come a long way, some veterinarians and consumers harbor misconceptions about these products and their effect on dogs based upon their impressions of older, crudely designed devices. To the contrary, clinical studies in recent years offer conclusive evidence that the proper use of modern electronic training devices does not lead to adverse physiological effects on dogs.

This paper presents case studies, conclusions and informed opinions on risks versus benefits from researchers at the Tuskegee University College of Veterinary Medicine, international canine behavior experts, practicing veterinarians, animal welfare organizations, professional dog trainers, sport dog enthusiasts and others who have tested and observed the effects of electronic training devices on dogs in shelters and laboratories, on farms and in other real-world settings.

As you will gather from reviewing the current literature, a wide range of credible experts believe that the average dog owner with basic knowledge of training techniques can effectively and humanely use electronic training devices for behavioral modification, obedience training and containment needs.

This paper dispels a number of myths about electronic training devices. As evidence of the evolving body of knowledge about today's technology, conclusions about the safety and effectiveness of modern electronic training devices are supported by The Humane Society of the United States, The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and the International Association of Canine Professionals, among others.

Because dog owners frequently ask veterinarians how to address common behavioral issues, professionals have an opportunity to impart credible, proactive and vital information that can greatly increase the likelihood of a dog's acceptance into the family. This paper's purpose is to help you become more familiar with credible research into and objective facts about today's products so as to be conversant when discussing behavioral solutions with dog owners.

Myths About Electronic Training Devices

Evidence exists that almost all veterinarians are concerned about the alarming rise in shelter populations and euthanasia statistics—many of which are attributable to behavioral issues. Because veterinarians are in a unique and credible position to proactively educate dog owners about behavioral health, it is helpful to be aware of the latest tools that dog owners may employ to help their pets succeed as valued and permanent members of the family.

This paper will dispel many myths about electronic training devices, including that:

- They make dogs aggressive;

Or, conversely . . .

- . . . The devices only work on aggressive dogs
- They "shock" the dog
- Electronic collars can cause burns
- Dog owners have to be expert trainers to use the devices

Uses for Electronic Training Devices

A survey of current literature from canine behaviorists, psychologists, and veterinary researchers suggests that many behavioral problems other than aggression, fears and anxiety-related behaviors may be addressed by the appropriate use of electronic training devices. These behaviors include but are not limited to:

- Excessive barking
- Pulling on leash while walking
- Bolting through doors
- Digging
- Failure to come when called
- Jumping up on owners / visitors
- Hurdling fences
- Roaming
- Chasing cars / people
- Destructive behavior
- Trash raiding
- Containment issues

Origin and Evolution of Modern Electronic Training Devices

U.S. pet owners purchased more than 2 million remote training devices, pet containment systems and bark collars in 2001.

— Radio Systems Corporation industry research

Over the years, electronic training devices have been known by many monikers—most notably and most graphically "shock collars." Other terms include "electronic collars," "e-collars," and also "remote trainers" when used in a generic sense.

The current and more accurate term "electronic training devices" recognizes that while the products do incorporate a degree of electrical or "static" stimulation, the term "shock" is a misnomer for today's technology. The distinctions between first generation products and today's devices will be explored throughout this paper.

The first electronic training devices were used by outdoors enthusiasts to train their hunting dogs. When the products proved effective and popular with sport dog owners, leading manufacturers expanded their product lines and reduced the cost to make the devices accessible to companion dog owners. Today there are at least eight major manufacturers of electronic training devices marketing their products globally at retail outlets, through mail order catalogues and online.

Since becoming widely available, consumer awareness and sales of electronic training devices have grown steadily from approximately 200,000 units in 1996 to more than 2 million units today. Unit sales of electronic training devices are projected to reach 4 million annually by 2007 — indicating acceptance by consumers in greater and greater numbers.

Types of Electronic Training Devices

Modern electronic training devices deliver a low-voltage electrical correction through contact points attached to a dog collar. The products are generally broken down into three classes, each with its own training applications.

Pet containment systems offer a method of keeping a dog at home within a yard without the necessity of constructing a physical barrier. They may be installed in-ground for aesthetics, or above ground as a standalone solution or reinforcement for an existing barrier that is not keeping the dog contained. In addition to newer wireless models there are also systems designed for indoor use that can be scaled from very small to larger areas.

Bark control collars are used to curb excessive and/or nuisance barking by delivering an automatic correction from the collar. While these collars come in electronic, citronella and sonic varieties, this paper addresses electronic correction bark control collars only.

Training collars or "remote trainers" allow the owner to train the dog at close range or at a distance, even when it is off-lead or otherwise out of immediate reach. Electronic remote training devices consist of a collar with a receiving unit and a remote hand-held transmitter held by the user. When the appropriate button is pressed on the hand-held transmitter, the dog receives a warning tone or a stimulation (electronic, vibration, etc.).

In addition to being useful for deterring undesired behaviors, remote trainers have also proven highly effective for teaching obedience commands.

As with all training protocols or products, we recommend a thorough physical examination and consultation with a veterinarian to determine any health or temperament problems that could be treated with medical care.