

INTRODUCING YOUR DOG TO A HEAD HALTER

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by Caden Cristopher Anarchy

This text is a chapter from my e-book on loose leash walking. Royalty-free cover image by user andrescarlofotografia from Pixabay. Thank you!

Head halters are effective in preventing strong pulling in most dogs. Unlike harnesses and collars, a head halter should be gradually introduced to your dog rather than just put on. In order to make sure your dog doesn't only tolerate the head halter, but loves it from the very beginning, we will shape putting their nose into the loop voluntarily.

Tip: I recommend using a leash with a snap on either end when walking your dog in a head halter until you are *absolutely certain* they cannot paw it off. Attach one snap to the head halter and the other one to a collar or harness. (Search for “double-ended leash” or "European leash.")

Do you want to shape your leash-puller to put their nose into the loop of a head halter? Follow the protocol layed out below in *Introducing your dog to a head halter*. Most dogs will be able to reach their training goal in 1-2 weeks. Plan on spending 5-10 minutes a day on this training project.

We can lure or shape our dogs to put their muzzle into the head halter. Personally, I like starting out with shaping and add a bit of luring once the dog is targeting the halter.

Step 1

1. Present the head halter to your dog.

2. Click for any interaction (or - depending on your dog and what they offer - even just a look or step in its direction).
3. Remove the head halter.
4. Throw a cookie.
5. When your dog reorients to you, present the halter again.
6. Click for any interaction - maybe now, you'll get two steps towards it or even a touch!
7. Remove the head halter.
8. Throw a cookie.
9. When the dog reorients to you, present the halter again.
10. Click for the next approximation towards your target behavior!

Meet Nala, a board & train guest. She's a pet dog who isn't familiar with shaping. I've only started using a marker sound (tongue click) with her two days ago. Even though Nala isn't familiar with shaping, she's a curious dog and catches on quickly in her first head halter session!



<https://youtu.be/5TAh8B9tCr4>

Step 2

Once your dog reliably touches the head halter as soon as you present it (or even sticks their nose in a bit if you hold it just right), you are ready for the next step: feeding through the loop. Taking the treat will cause them to feel the fabric on their nose and get used to feeling it on their muzzle:



<https://youtu.be/CMN8HjLHrLk>

(The timing of my “get it” cue and treat in the video above isn’t great. Ideally, I’d only start moving my hand after I’ve finished saying the cue.)

Step 3

Next, feed in such a way that your dog keeps their nose in the loop a little longer:



<https://youtu.be/rX43OqEjyYE>

Step 4

Mark and feed for choosing to keep the nose in the loop between treats!

The room service marker I'm using with Grit is "Good!" It means, "A reinforcer is coming. Hold your position and I'll deliver it right to your mouth."



<https://youtu.be/aUV-7CkjlFU>

Step 5

Closing the halter:

1. Offer the halter.
2. Mark and feed when your dog pushes their nose in the loop.
3. Close the halter.
4. Mark and feed 5 times, one treat after the other.
5. Remove the halter.



<https://youtu.be/MvnQNbdMvrE>

Step 6

Increasing the duration

Gradually increase the time between treats to 5 seconds, like shown in the video below. At this point, it doesn't matter if your dog sits, stands or lies down. Go with whatever position they offer!



<https://youtu.be/EB8Ur5BgLVs>

Step 7

Moving naturally while wearing the halter

In this step, your dog will learn to perform 3 new actions with the head halter on: run, think (respond to a cue) and lower their head to pick up treats.

1. Offer the halter and put it on in the usual way.
2. Toss a treat for your dog to chase.
3. Cue a hand touch when they lift their head after eating the treat. (If your dog doesn't know

how to do a hand touch, do a recall instead.)

4. Mark and feed for the hand touch.

5. Toss another treat.

6. Start over with step 2. The goal is for your dog to chase treats and do hand touches (or recalls) joyfully.



https://youtu.be/JkRBvB_rmMk

Step 8

Add the weight of the leash and start walking:

1. Offer the halter.

2. Mark and feed when your dog pushes their nose into the loop.

3. Close the halter.

4. Mark and feed.

5. Clip the leash to the halter.

6. Mark and feed.

7. Walk three steps and feed.
8. Walk three steps and feed.
9. Walk three steps and feed.
10. Take off the halter.



<https://youtu.be/v-owoAVoz4Y>

Step 9

Giving in to leash pressure:

Unlike in your training sessions, your dog will occasionally pull or reach the end of their leash when out on a walk. This can feel weird and scary for dogs who have never felt the pressure a head halter puts on their muzzle. In order to create a positive conditioned emotional response from the get-go, we'll practice this before venturing out into the world. The giving in to leash pressure game teaches your dog that leash pressure is a cue to return to you and will be rewarded.

1. Gently pull on the leash. Pull *towards you* rather than up - you want to convey directional information!
2. Release the tension immediately, even if your dog didn't respond.
4. Feed a treat *in the direction of the pull* in such a way that the dog has to take 2-3 steps to reach the treat: leash pressure predicts that a treat will show up in the direction of the pull.
5. Toss a treat for them to chase to increase the distance between you. Make sure the leash stays loose when they chases the treat.
6. Repeat step 1-5!
7. Practice short sessions of this game until your dog happily chases treats and immediately responds to the leash pressure, like Game in the video below.



<https://youtu.be/RlDnOY17P4E>

Step 10

Start walking your dog in their head halter!

Safety tip:

When you first start walking your dog in a halter, use a double-ended leash or tie 2 regular leashes together. Clip one end of the leash to the halter and the other end to a harness or collar. Walk without a second point of attachment (collar or harness) only once you are sure that the halter is sized correctly and your dog can't paw it off!



<https://youtu.be/u7nayCieOKY>

Most dogs will be able to go right to wearing the halter for an entire walk once you have worked through steps 1 to 9: sniffing things and experiencing the world is too distracting for them to be annoyed by the weird thing on their nose!

Does your dog move awkwardly or try pawing the halter off when you first start using it on a walk? Only keep the halter on for the first 30 seconds of your walk. Then, take it off and switch to a collar or harness. With every walk you take, you should be able to extend the time your dog is wearing the halter. Taking it off and continuing the walk on a harness or collar will create a positive emotional response to the halter-wearing that preceded it.