

Flemish Government

Animal Welfare Department

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OPINION 22/04/2021 - Flemish Animal Welfare Council

Electric collars on dogs and cats

Operation and types

Electronic collars are assistive devices designed to aid in training by applying electric current to the skin. Some types of collars can also produce a sound or vibration; depending on the settings, they make a warning sound or a warning vibration followed by an electrical stimulus if the animal does not change its behaviour.

There are three types of electronic collars:

- **Remote control training device:** a person administers an electric shock with a remote control to stop or teach a specific behaviour.
- **Collar coupled with an invisible fence:** an area is demarcated with an underground fence. As the animal approaches the fence, the collar automatically administers an electrical stimulus.
- **Anti-barking collar:** when the animal barks, the collar automatically administers an electrical stimulus to stop this behaviour;

Electronic collars are less common for cats and their use is limited to the first two types.

Use and well-being risks

Electronic collars are used in aversion training. In recent years, there has been a global trend to discourage aversion training and encourage reward-oriented training. The dog is then given a reward for desired behaviour, which in turn increases.

With anti-barking collars and invisible fencing, the risk of well-being problems is lower because the dog can predict or control the electric shock. The risk is greatest when a remote control training device is used. This is because incorrect timing and inconsistent delivery of the shock can cause the animal to become stressed.

In its 2018 opinion on electric collars, the Flemish Animal Welfare Council recommended positive reward training for the training of dogs, but the council did not advocate a blanket ban on electric collars at the time because in exceptional cases an electric collar can be a necessary tool for training dogs. In practice, it is difficult to precisely define these cases.

The animal welfare minister asked for this to be reviewed.

Scientific studies

Since 2018, only the results of the comprehensive British study¹ on remote control training devices have continued to be published. In these studies, reduced well-being was observed in some dogs. It was also demonstrated that a reward-based training method is as effective and easy to apply as one using a remote control training device.

There is very limited or no scientific research on anti-barking collars and collars linked to an invisible fence.

More generally, more recent literature does demonstrate risks associated with training methods based on aversion.

Behaviour specialists: proponents and opponents

In 2018, behaviourists' opinions on the use of collars were divided. The Animal Welfare Service of the Department of Environment and Spatial Development therefore launched an online survey of behavioural therapists and dog trainers in 2020. Sixty-three behavioural therapists and dog trainers were contacted to participate in the survey, 1,805 responses were received (191 behavioural therapists, 448 dog trainers, 653 hunters, 21 veterinarians and 1,375 others). In their responses, hunters argued for the retention of training collars in hunting.

Among the group of behavioural therapists, nearly 90% advocated a complete ban or a ban with exceptions. Among dog trainers, a majority was also in favour of a ban or a ban with exceptions. Behavioural therapists regularly referred to the European Society of Veterinary Clinical Ethology's (ESVCE) 'Position statement' on electronic training devices².

In it, ESVCE strongly opposes the use of electric collars in dog training and promotes the use of training programmes based on positive reward training.

ESVCE also states that for problem behaviour related to fear, fright and frustration, the use of an electric collar can exacerbate these problems. This is because the cause of the problem is not considered.

¹Cooper, J., Wright, H., Mills, D., Casey, R., Blackwell, E., van Driel, K., Lines, J. (2013) Studies to assess the effects of pet training aids, specifically remote static pulse systems, on the welfare of domestic dogs. Final report on DEFRA Project AW1402. University of Lincoln and University of Bristol.

Cooper, J., Cracknell, N., Hardiman, J. and Mills, D. (2013) Studies to assess the effects of pet training aids, specifically remote static pulse systems, on the welfare of domestic dogs; field study of dogs in training. Final report on DEFRA Project AW1402A. University of Lincoln and University of Bristol.

² <http://www.esvce.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ESVCE-Position-Statement-e-collar.pdf>

Other countries

Several European countries, namely Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Slovenia, parts of the United Kingdom and Sweden have bans or restrictions on the use of electric collars. A blanket ban is also on the table in the Netherlands.

Alternatives

For training and anti-barking collars with electric shocks, several alternatives are currently on the market, such as collars that only produce sound, a vibration and/or light. Spray collars are also available.

For collars paired with an electric fence, these alternatives are not available. However, a physical fence can be an alternative here.

Collars linked to an invisible fence

Since the dog can predict and control the electrical stimulus with this type of collar, the risk to its well-being risk is limited. Moreover, this system offers the possibility of giving an animal more freedom of movement within an unfenced domain. For these reasons, the Council has fewer reservations against the use of these collars.

When first using this invisible fence, training with flags is necessary so that the dog knows where the wire/fence is (underground).

Flemish Animal Welfare Council opinion

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council recommends **positive reward training for training** dogs. If aversion training is still appropriate, remote control training devices and anti-barking collars have **alternatives** on the market that do not involve administering an electrical stimulus to the dog. That is why the **Council is now calling for a ban on remote control training collars and anti-barking collars that can administer electrical stimuli.**

In the case of collars linked to an invisible fence, an **exception** may be considered, as the welfare risk is lower and the availability of free space for the animal to run loose should be considered.

Furthermore, the Council also recommends that an **exception** to the above prohibition be provided for up to **six years** for dogs used in **police, defence or civil security operations**. These six years should allow these services to take the necessary measures to ensure that the use of an electric collar is no longer necessary in these services either.

As for **cats**, training collars are currently not very common. Based on the precautionary principle, the Council also proposes a **ban** on remote control training collars for cats.

Currently, only the use of electric collars in dogs and cats can be **legally** banned. The Flemish Animal Welfare Council recommends providing a legal basis so that in addition to the use, the **sale** and **purchase** of electric collars is also **banned**.

Footnote:

"The East Flanders animal shelters, the Limburg animal shelters, the Dutch-speaking Regional Council of the Order of Veterinarians, General Farmers' Syndicate and Andibel issue the following minority opinion: "We believe that the generalised banning of electric collars for dogs is not the right strategy. The correct use of the new generation of collars (anti-barking collar, invisible fence, training collar) does not lead to injury or reduce animal welfare. The behavioural change obtained by electrical aids actually results in more freedom and/or living comfort for the dogs involved. We believe that the ban will inevitably lead to a number of problems (e.g. mandatory euthanasia for problem behaviour or neighbour disputes about barking dogs). We are convinced that a proper legal framework for appropriate use, with minimum competences of users and homologated devices, offer the best guarantee to prevent animal suffering."