



E-Collar Training

A Beginners Guide



You're curious. You have questions. Here's everything you need to know about e-collar conditioning.

No fluff, no sugar-coating, no “dog trainer speak” - this guide is a complete rundown of modern e-collar conditioning to help you decide if it's the right option for you and your dog.

What is an e-collar?

We'll start with what it's not. A modern, high quality e-collar is nothing like the “shock collar” you're probably imagining.

A proper e-collar uses the same technology as a TENs machine (a device used in physiotherapy to stimulate nerve endings or muscles, also used for pain relief during birth!) to provide stimulation with 100 levels to allow you to fine tune it to your dog and use the lowest effective level

The system consists of the receiver, which is worn by your dog, and the transmitter or remote that you are in control of. You apply the stimulation at exactly the time and level you want (not like a geo-fencing system which will automatically trigger stimulation when the dog is a certain distance away).

Good quality collars are waterproof, make sure the stimulation levels remain consistent in all conditions and are not available cheaply on Amazon - avoid those as they likely will just use one, high level of stimulation.

Why are they used?

E-collars are used to provide tactile communication with your dog when they are off lead. The feeling of the stimulation acts as added pressure to respond to a command, such as recall, which can aid in teaching your dog to follow commands even when under distraction. Dogs who have a high level of prey drive or are very environment-focused tend to particularly benefit from e-collar training as it allows them to be safely off lead, fulfilled and exercised .

Think of it like this - if you were busy dancing in a loud nightclub, you might struggle to hear your friend calling your name. But if they were to tap you on the shoulder at the same time you are more likely to respond as you can physically feel them. Through low-level conditioning, we teach your dog how to respond when they feel the stimulation so they know exactly what it means.

They can even be used as a tool to help deaf dogs achieve off lead freedom by conditioning them to return to their owner when they feel the stimulation.

What's the process?

E-collar conditioning should always be carried out under guidance of an experienced and reputable trainer who understands the tool. The journey will look slightly different for every dog, but in general it looks like this:

PHASE 1: Working Level

First, we find the lowest level your dog can actually feel. Typically, this is below a 10, usually somewhere around 4-7. At this level, the stimulation is not at all painful, it's simply something they can physically feel.

Then we start conditioning by pairing the low level stimulation with a reward (such as food or a ball) so they have a positive association with the feeling.

PHASE 2: Layering in commands

Then we layer the low level stimulation over commands that your dog already knows - such as recall. This teaches them that following the command both removes the low level “pressure” and leads to a reward. Think back to the loud nightclub; imagine your friend calls your name and taps you on the shoulder. You respond by turning around, which means they stop tapping you on the shoulder (i.e. the pressure goes away) and then they hand you a drink (you get something good).

PHASE 3: Teaching a “No”

Once your dog has a good understanding of what they’re being asked to do and how to respond to the tool, it’s time for the final piece of the puzzle - teaching them what a fair “no” means for when chasing that rabbit just looks a bit too fun.

Before you panic, a “no” (i.e. applying a fair correction) should not cause your dog to be scared, fearful or shut down. It should simply be a learning experience so they understand when they’ve made the wrong decision. Yes, it needs to be just aversive enough that they care about it - otherwise it wouldn’t be a correction - but if done appropriately, at the right time, at the right (lowest effective) level, with the right prior training and conditioning, your dog should just think “oops, fair enough - sorry”, do the thing they were supposed to and move on with life - nothing more, nothing less.

Will I need it forever?

With proper training your dog’s recall should be highly reliable with or without an e-collar. Once you’ve taught the behaviour, worked around distractions and gone through the conditioning process you are not going to need to press a button to be able to recall your dog every time, it is there purely as a seat belt just in case that rabbit looks too enticing one day - remember, dogs are opportunistic predators, not robots.

What if my dog's sensitive?

Even sensitive dogs can be conditioned to an e-collar without causing them to shut down or be fearful. Using a proper e-collar with 100 levels of stimulation means you can fine tune it to the lowest level they can actually feel, and - through the proper conditioning process - teach them exactly how to respond.

Prey drive (and the adrenaline that is released) also drastically changes the way your dog feels and their sensitivity to stimulation in the moment. Dogs tend to be a lot less sensitive when that prey drive kicks in and they are mid-chase, which is why having a tactile stimulation with adjustable levels is important to be able to always use the lowest, but still effective dose.

For spaniels who are often sensitive souls when not distracted, but also have high levels of prey-drive, proper e-collar conditioning can be what takes them from having "great recall, until...", to having "great recall, even when..."

Is it cruel?

There's a fair amount of scaremongering around ecollars online as a result of people either seeing them being used incorrectly or simply not understanding the tool and making assumptions.

When using a quality, modern e-collar and following a thorough, low level conditioning process there is absolutely nothing cruel about it, your dog will not be scared of you or the collar. When conditioning is done properly, your dog should understand exactly what the low level stimulation means and how to respond with no fear - their same, happy, wiggly self, just with much greater freedom through safe, off lead reliability.

If you're speaking to any trainer about e-collar conditioning you should be able to see their dogs or speak to previous clients who've been in your position - any good trainer should be happy to show you good e-collar conditioning.

Which e-collar is best?

For spaniels, I recommend the E-collar Technologies Micro-Educator (not affiliated or sponsored, just my genuine recommendation from e-collar conditioning many many spaniels). It's a smaller collar which fits spaniels better than their standard "Mini-Educator" and the stimulation levels are 20% lower as well which suits more sensitive dogs.

Other reputable brands that produce good quality e-collars with a wide range of proper stimulation levels are Dogtra and Martin Systems - these and E-Collar Technologies are the only brands of e-collar I personally am willing to support clients in using due to their quality and reputation.

How do I get started?

If you want to discuss if e-collar conditioning is the right option for you and your spaniel, the next step is to [book a free consultation call](#).

The call will be about 20-30 minutes, no pressure - just a chance to discuss your dog in detail, what you're looking to achieve, their current training and answer any questions you might have.

