

Humane Society International **Electronic** *Library*

How to Walk a Shelter Dog

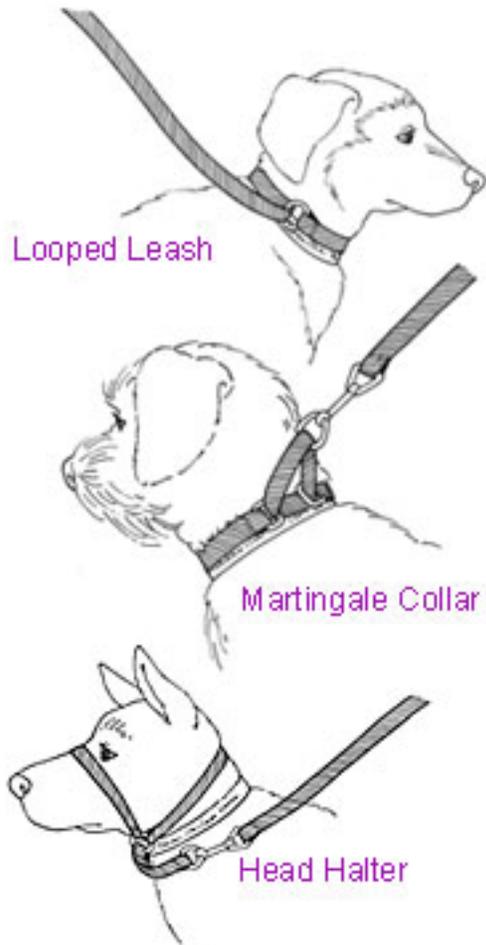
Taking a dog for a walk might seem as simple a task as tying your shoelaces, but giving shelter dogs a little exercise involves more than just grabbing a leash and running out the nearest door. As a volunteer you'll need to do a few things to ensure your safety, the safety of the animals, and the safety of shelter workers and visitors. Talk to a supervisor about the possible need for a rabies vaccination and any other preventive measures, then sit down and learn all you can about the system in place to exercise and socialize shelter dogs. A well-organized dog walking program provides name tags or even color-coded T-shirts for volunteers so there's no mistaking who's who. And many shelters have systems in place—color-coded clothespins or whiteboards, for instance—to indicate which dogs need to be walked and which ones may have health problems that will leave them out of action for a while. Make sure you know the ins and outs of your shelter's program before heading out the door.

Every time you take a dog for a stroll, you're teaching him how to respond to his caretakers and his environment. If you can spend a few moments teaching an unruly, overanxious dog how to behave, you'll not only make future walks go more smoothly but also increase that dog's chances of finding a lifelong home.

1: First Things First

If you're a volunteer scheduled to walk dogs, check in with a supervisor or sign in as soon as you arrive, so that everyone knows you'll be working in the kennels. And before you pick out your chaperone for the next few minutes, stash a few treats in your pockets and pick up a few plastic bags and a leash. But don't put that leash on the first dog you come across. Check to see if the animal has been out recently, and make sure there are no health problems that might keep a dog out of commission for a few days. If you come upon an unruly animal or one who's bigger than you, leave him to a more experienced staff person or volunteer.





Looped Leash

Martingale Collar

Head Halter

2: Select the Proper Attire

Your shelter may use one of a few different collars, any of which will do the job. Though "choke chains" were once popular among shelters, dog trainers are finding that there are better ways to teach a dog how to respond to a handler. Some shelters are turning to simple "noose" collars, or looped leads, which provide just as much control but which can't be used for firm "corrections." So-called "martingale" collars also provide control while preventing the risk of injury to an animal. Halter collars are very effective and perhaps the most humane, but may be more difficult to size and fit for use on different animals. Whichever collars your shelter prefers, be sure to use them properly to gently guide dogs rather than to forcibly move animals against their will.

Once the collar is in place, attach a six-foot nylon leash, place your hand through the loop and grasp the lead; or hold the loop with one hand and grab the middle of the leash with the other. Wrapping the leash around your wrist or individual fingers won't give you much control over the animal, and may even cause you to injure your hand the first time a big dog lunges at a squirrel, a bird, or another dog.

3: Don't Let 'Em Walk All Over You

Before you open the kennel gate, have the leash ready and be sure you know how to work the latch. Most kennel doors are designed to thwart escape by even the craftiest canine, so the latches may be difficult to open with one hand. Take a few moments to practice on an empty cage until you get the knack; the ability to quickly open and close a cage door will be important when you're leaving and even more so when you come back.

Many dog walkers like to walk into the kennel, crouch to the animal's level, and "introduce" themselves before venturing out. More experienced walkers simply open the cage door a few inches and anticipate the dog's next move by holding the collar at "dog-level" and allowing the animal to stick his head through the opening on his way out. Either way, before you and your companion leave the kennels, look out for other dog walkers and members of the public, and wait until the coast is clear.



4: Walk This Way

The first lesson to teach a shelter dog is that nobody's going anywhere if the leash isn't slack. If the dog is constantly pulling, stand in place until he slows down or returns to you. In time, his newly learned manners will make for nicer walks and a nicer chance for adoption, too. (Some shelters ask volunteers to insist that animals sit before allowing them outside or giving them food, a great way to train an animal during his stay, one that requires consistency from every walker.)

Try to avoid high-traffic areas near automobiles and members of the public. Be sure to clean up after the dog, too. And if you notice anything wrong with the animal's stool, contact a member of the animal care team when you return.



5: Guarantee a Happy Ending

Unfortunately, few dogs are aware of the saying, "All good things must end," so you may encounter a little resistance when your companion realizes he's about to return to the kennel. Some dogs are happy to return to their temporary den, but for those who refuse to cooperate, try tossing a treat into the back of the cage, releasing the collar, and quickly closing the door. Or you can enter the kennel with the dog, stand between the dog and the kennel door, close the door, remove the collar, open the door toward you, and squeeze through the narrow opening. Before you leave, make sure the kennel is relatively clean and the water bowl is full.

Record when the animal was walked and write down anything noteworthy. If a dog is well behaved or if he's frightened around larger dogs, the information may help fellow staffers find the dog an appropriate home.

Lastly, dispose of any waste, wash your hands, grab another baggie, and move on to the next grateful creature. Even if you can only spare a few minutes of your day to walk an animal or two, the dogs, the shelter staff, and other volunteers will be glad you did.