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## Flemish Animal Welfare Council – OPINION 21/02/2018

# Shock collars for dogs

Following a complaint and questions pertaining to the use of shock collars for dogs, the Flemish minister responsible for animal welfare asked to peruse the Federal for Animal Welfare Council's 2010 opinion pertaining to this subject.

That federal opinion considered the use of shock collars acceptable with specific conditions for their manufacture, sale and use.

### Operation and types

Shock collars for dogs are devices that are designed as an aid to training by administering an electrical current to the skin. Some models also produce a sound or vibration; depending on the settings, they elicit a warning sound or vibration, followed by an electric pulse if the dog does not change its behaviour.

There are three types of shock collars:

- **Remote control training devices:** remote control is used to apply an electric pulse to prevent or teach a specific behaviour.
- **Collars linked to invisible fencing:** an area is demarcated using an underground fence. If the dog approaches the fence, the collar automatically applies an electric pulse.
- **Bark control collars:** if the dog barks, the collar automatically applies an electric pulse to stop this behaviour.

### Use and welfare risks

Shock collars are used in aversion training. In recent years, the global tendency has been to discourage aversion training and encourage reward-oriented training. The dog receives a reward for exhibiting the desired behaviour which subsequently increases.

The risk of welfare problems with bark control collars and invisible fencing is lower because the dog can predict or control the electric pulse.

The greatest risk is associated with using a remote control training device. Incorrect timing and inconsistent delivery of the shock can result in the dog becoming stressed.

### **Scientific studies**

Recent British studies<sup>i</sup> on the use of remote training devices show that the effect varies greatly from dog to dog. In some dogs negative emotional stress was observed from a behavioural and physiological perspective, and welfare was detrimentally impacted.

A follow-up study in dogs with behavioural problems demonstrated that reward-oriented training methods are as effective and easy to apply as training methods that employ remote control training devices. There is extremely limited to no scientific research linked to bark control collars and invisible fencing.

### **Behaviour specialists: proponents and opponents**

Behaviour specialist opinion is divided. Amongst other things, opponents to the use of shock collars argue that sufficient alternative training methods are available. Users must additionally have a thorough knowledge of the dog's behaviour in order to use shock collars correctly.

Proponents consider it one of the training aids that can help prevent owners from having to surrender their dog or have it euthanised. Whilst the use of shock collars is generally avoided, it still forms part of an integrated training approach in exceptional cases. Proponents of shock collars additionally point out that other training aids (such as slip collars, pinch collars) are equally prone to incorrect use.

Even the Federal Police and Defence only use shock collars for dog training in exceptional cases.

### **Flemish Council for Animal Welfare opinion**

The Flemish Council for Animal Welfare recommends **positive reward training** for the training of dogs. However, it does **not advocate a general ban** on shock collars, as shock collars can be a necessary aid to dog training in **exceptional cases**. It is difficult to precisely define these cases. The Flemish Council therefore endorses the Federal Council for Animal Welfare's 2010 opinion pertaining to shock collars, which clearly expresses these nuances.

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<sup>i</sup> Cooper, 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.