



Introducing a Harness

Walking your dog in a harness is a useful way of reducing the risk of injury, maximizing comfort, and making walkies more enjoyable for everyone! The harness itself is unlikely stop your dog wanting to pull ahead when you're out and about, so you'll need to teach them to walk next to you on a loose lead just like you would if you were attaching their lead to a collar.

Dogs can sometimes be a little unsure about having a harness put on for the first time. A dog who hasn't been given the opportunity to learn to wear a harness happily might therefore become afraid of them, shying away or completely avoiding you when they see you approaching with the harness. Taking the time to introduce your dog's harness in a kind, gentle, and fun way is likely to save you both a lot of stress in the long term, as your dog will learn to really enjoy wearing their harness and you putting it on them!

Choosing a harness

There are many different types of harness available but it's important to choose carefully so your dog's movement is not restricted. Some harnesses cross directly in front of the shoulders preventing natural movement, and you should avoid these.

Most harnesses require your dog to put their head through an opening, but you can find alternatives that clip around the neck and body which might be better for dogs who are a little head-shy.

Make sure your dog's harness fits well. You should be able to fit a finger comfortably between the strapping and their body while they're wearing it so it doesn't move position while the dog's moving. Your dog shouldn't be able to slip out of it.

9 steps to happy harnessing

Remember, patience is key when introducing new equipment as you are making a life-long investment in your dog's happiness! Each step will need to be repeated several times before moving on to the next.

- 🐾 **Step 1:** Leave the harness on the ground with some treats sprinkled around it. Allow your dog to sniff and investigate it.
- 🐾 **Step 2:** After a few days of leaving it on the ground with treats, you can lift the harness and feed your dog treats by placing your hand through the opening.
- 🐾 **Step 3:** You can now move your hand a little further back, so your dog has to move their nose and mouth right through the opening in order to get their treats. If they retreat simply remove the harness straight away and feed them anyway.
- 🐾 **Step 4:** Once your dog is happily putting their head through the opening in order to get their treat, you can now let go of the harness and let it gently hang around their neck while you continue to feed them treats. If they back away or appear worried simply remove the harness straight away and continue to feed them.



- ❖ **Step 5:** You can now try closing one of the clasps while you are just holding the harness next to your dog. This will prepare them for the sound of the clasp closing before you do this while they're wearing the harness, and when the noise will happen behind their head!
- ❖ **Step 6:** Once your dog is happy with steps 4 and 5 you can attempt to fasten one of the clasps over their back. Always give them treats while they are learning that this is the next stage.
- ❖ **Step 7:** You can now fasten any other clasps your harness might have. Remember this noise might be a little frightening so keep the treats coming so your dog learns to enjoy the sound, as it means they always gets a treat!
- ❖ **Step 8:** If your dog isn't showing any signs of distress, then you can get them used to moving around in their harness. Play a game with their favourite toy or do some fun training with their favourite treats.
- ❖ **Step 9:** Take your dog for a walk with their harness on, giving them treats for walking while wearing it. Hopefully your dog will not have difficulties wearing their harness at this point, however if they do then simply go back to the step at which your dog was most comfortable and try again from that stage, building up their confidence gradually.

Signs of fear or anxiety

Signs of fear or anxiety can be subtle such as licking lips, moving away, yawning and showing the whites of the eyes, or more obvious such as freezing, growling or, if your dog becomes very frightened, even biting. If you see any of these signs, stop. Our Body Language handout provides information on learning to recognise how your dog is feeling and how to respond appropriately. Always respond to your dog's signals so they know they can trust you to understand what they are communicating and help them out!

Remember that to comply with the law, when you are in public spaces your dog will need to wear a collar with an ID tag, even if you are walking them in their harness!

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The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice.