

How to Assemble and Use an Elizabethan Collar

BACKGROUND

Elizabethan collars (“E-collars”) are lampshade-shaped devices a dog or cat wears around the neck to protect its own tissue from self-trauma during healing. Commonly an E-collar is worn after surgery to keep the animal from licking, chewing, or otherwise disturbing the area of the body that was operated on. A dog or cat’s licking, contrary to popular myth, is not helpful but in fact delays tissue healing and favors infection. Other common uses of E-collars include protecting bandages or dressings that cover wounds and during treatment of ear infections or facial lesions to protect these areas from being scratched with a hind paw.

GETTING STARTED

There are several different types of E-collars available. Generally these can be acquired at a veterinary hospital or a pet supply store. The two most popular types are:

- *Plastic (clear, white, or grey):* These are thick, durable, multi-purpose E-collars. Owing to their strength, they provide the best protection. They are also easy to clean. Before construction, these look like a half-circle of plastic with open square notches along one end and slits along the other end. Tabs face the center of the half-circle. When assembled, they are cone shaped and are held in place with a loop of gauze around the neck. There are variations of this type of E-collar that are secured with Velcro or metal stud-type buttons.



A correctly-sized Elizabethan collar is slightly bigger than the length of the muzzle, to prevent self-trauma through chewing or licking past the collar.

- *Thin, waterproof paper (blue):* These are shaped like a satellite dish and are soft, pliable, lightweight paper collars that are appropriate for pets that do not vigorously attempt to reach around them. A major advantage is that they do not hurt when the pet collides with a person’s legs, nor do they have as much potential to cause damage to doorways or furniture as the

hard plastic collars. With a strong and determined dog or cat, however, these paper collars may not be sturdy enough (destroyed with a few strong scratches or chews). These large paper collars are simply secured with fabric laces around the neck.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

All types of E-collars are available in various sizes and should be sized appropriately. An E-collar that is too big can easily slip off, whereas one that is too small can irritate or even cut the skin around the neck or interfere with breathing. A properly sized E-collar is comfortable and effective at blocking self-trauma.

The main points to watch out for when placing the E-collar on a dog or cat (either for the first time or if it has slipped off) are:

- Make sure the E-collar is properly assembled and clean.
- When putting the plastic E-collar together, don’t worry about whether it is inside-out or right-side-out (same thing).
- Make sure plastic tabs and any other protruding parts don’t poke the pet’s eyes or ears while you are slipping it over the face and head. With hard plastic collars, you should firmly bend the loops that hold the string or gauze (which will tie the E-collar in place around the neck) outward, away from the hole for the head, for easier passage of the collar over the face.
- Make sure the string or gauze that will be tied around the neck is loose and is kept away from the pet’s mouth when you slip the collar over the face and head.
- When putting the E-collar on the dog or cat, there should always be one hand on the animal and one hand holding the collar. A common pitfall to avoid is to try putting an E-collar on a dog or cat by holding just the collar, not the animal. Holding the E-collar by the outer edge with both hands in an attempt to thrust it through and over the head in one quick motion is likely to frighten, annoy, or injure the pet and is not recommended.
- Make sure it is long enough to accomplish the goal of an E-collar: the length of the collar, when resting as far back on the neck as the pet’s shoulders, should still extend *past* the tip of the pet’s nose.

PROCEDURE: ASSEMBLING THE E-COLLAR

When the collar is already in a cone shape, see below.

If you need to assemble the hard plastic E-collar (new—flat sheet of plastic in the shape of a semicircle):

1. First identify the edge with the open square holes and the other edge with the slits. Note that on one edge, there are two or more parallel rows of slits. In step 3, you will need to choose the appropriate row of slits to create a collar that is the correct size.
2. Bend the collar into a cone shape such that these edges overlap. The square holes on one edge of the collar should lie on the outside (convex surface) of the cone on top of the slits on the other edge. To assemble the collar, the square holes and the slits will be held together by weaving a long plastic strip through them.
3. Since there are two or more parallel rows of slits, this is the opportunity to size the E-collar properly. Choose an amount of overlap (i.e., a particular row of slits) so that the hole for the neck is just large enough to allow the E-collar to pass over the head and ears snugly.

4. With the square holes lined up with the chosen row of slits, you can now use the long plastic strip to weave the two edges of the collar together in overlapping fashion. Bend the long strip of plastic to the outside (convex surface) of the collar, and slip it through the closest square hole and the first slit beneath that hole. Pull the strip all the way through into the concave part of the collar. Then feed the strip through the second slit and back through the same square hole, and pull the whole tab through to the convex surface of the collar. Pull firmly on the long strip to firmly seat the edges of the collar together; there should be two small plastic “shoulders” that prevent it from feeding too far in. You should now have the long strip forming a loop then diving into the collar and back out again, binding the two edges of the collar together at that point.
5. Repeat this “weaving” process with the second and third square holes (and their underlying strips) to fasten the edges of the E-collar together at three points and make a solid, firm cone.
6. To make loops for the gauze ribbon or lace that will hold the E-collar in place around the neck: curl each of the three or four small tabs toward the convex surface of the collar, and push each one first through the bottom slit (pointing it to the concave surface of the collar) and then back out through the second slit.

PROCEDURE: PLACING THE E-COLLAR ON YOUR PET

1. This procedure assumes the E-collar is already assembled, meaning it is cone or dish shaped. If it is not (i.e., it is a flat sheet of plastic), see above for assembly.
2. Sit or stand beside your dog or cat. For a right-handed person, be on the pet’s left side. Both of you should be facing in the

same direction, meaning the pet is along your right thigh. Face to face does not give you control and challenges the pet to escape.

3. Pick up the E-collar by the edge, at the large end of the cone, with your left hand.
4. Reach around with your right hand to the right side of the pet’s head, and hold the side of the head (cats, small dogs) or the side of muzzle (larger dogs).
5. Guide the nose and head through the smaller end of the E-collar as you slide the cone to sit in place, past the ears and around the neck.
6. For cats, it can be helpful to use your right elbow to create a nook with your right thigh (when you are sitting on a couch to do this, for example) that restrains the cat’s hind end, preventing the cat from backing out and away.
7. Likewise, keep the edge of the collar out of the cat or dog’s mouth by keeping the pet’s mouth closed with your right hand and pointing the nose through the hole of the E-collar. In other words, one hand takes the whole head (cats, small dogs) or just the muzzle (bigger dogs) and guides it nose first through the opening in the E-collar until the back edge of the collar has come to rest well past the ears.
8. Tie the string or gauze in a shoelace-type knot, snugly but not too tight. You should be able to slip two or three fingers comfortably between the neck and the tied string/gauze.

AFTERWARDS

When removing the E-collar, be sure to protect the pet’s eyes when slipping it on or off.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My dog is bumping into everything with the E-collar. Is there anything else I can use instead?

Ask your veterinarian if it is an option to change E-collar types. For a strong dog, motivated to get to the protected area, a larger, stiff, foam collar (like a neck brace) may work best. Alternatively, the blue paper E-collar may be an option.

My dog/cat manages to pry the E-collar off all the time. How can I get it to stay on?

With the help of a veterinary technician or veterinarian, you can select an E-collar size that is a very snug (but not excessively tight) fit. This size will not fit over the dog/cat's head. Therefore, you place it on your pet by assembling it as for new E-collars (above), but already in place around the neck so it cannot be removed by the pet. Another effective option is to use your dog's own collar, rather than gauze, to keep the E-collar in place.

My other pet is licking at the protected area. What can be done about that?

First, observe closely to be sure that the other pet is doing the licking and not the pet wearing the E-collar. Dogs and cats can be very good at getting past the end of an E-collar that is too short. Replace the E-collar with the appropriate size if necessary. If the other pet is doing the licking, then these pets should be separated to allow time for proper healing.

Can I just make one of these at home?

Commercial E-collars are made to be the proper size, durable, lightweight, easy to clean and keep in place, and comfortable. Homemade versions (made from a bucket with a hole cut from the bottom or from an actual lampshade) that were recommended decades ago are less safe and usually ineffective. They commonly cause injury (edges cut into the neck) and fail to protect the desired area.

My dog/cat doesn't want to eat/move/play when wearing an E-collar. What do I do?

In order to function properly at blocking chewing and licking, E-collars have to be longer than the pet's nose. Some dogs and cats may need help during the first day to learn how to pick up the E-collar and place it over the food and water dishes. Be patient while they are learning how to navigate through the house with their new accessory. It can be helpful to lift the bowls by hand, or to make them elevated by placing them on a box or other object. Ask a veterinarian or veterinary technician to check the size before considering alternatives to the collar. Discuss options like removing the collar while the pet is under constant observation during mealtime.

My pet's neck and head are long and narrow—his E-collar slips right over his head. How do I keep this from happening?

A veterinary technician can demonstrate how to better secure the E-collar by looping gauze under the armpits and tying it to the collar portion. Alternatively, use your dog's own collar, rather than a loop of gauze, to keep the E-collar in place.

What if I just leave the E-collar off? I should be able to keep an eye on things.

This is a gamble. Some pets don't lick or scratch when the E-collar is taken off, but many do cause damage to the delicate tissues, and this damage can be done very quickly. Entire surgical operations have had to be redone because of tissue damage inflicted in 10 seconds of licking and chewing by a pet that removed an E-collar. For some situations, depending on the location of the area that is healing and the degree of risk, it may be possible to use light dressings or loose coverings (e.g., stockinette) at certain stages, and you can discuss this with your veterinarian as a better option than taking the E-collar off altogether.

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