

The Elizabethan Collar: No Shame Involved



“Does my pet really need to wear the plastic cone?” This question is frequently asked by clients in the exam room. In short, the answer will always be a resounding “yes”. Veterinarians don’t suggest it for their own health, they suggest it for your pet’s.

The dreaded “cone of shame” is definitely a misnomer. Wearing an e-collar prevents the patient from irritating (licking, biting, scratching) an already compromised area that needs time to heal. No shame involved. Let’s look at it from a behavioral point of view.

Animals may not always make decisions in their own best interest. Say a wild dog incurs a sizeable laceration when running through a thicket of brush. It hurts and he’ll try to alleviate the discomfort by taking action. Licking at the wound helps in this respect, albeit for a brief amount of time. As long as the wound is bothersome, he’ll continue to lick. Each time he licks, he introduces bacteria into the site, and he irritates the tissues, often resulting in infection. The same applies with our own furry family members. No matter how well-mannered or well-trained our pets are, they’ll often try to get to an injured, but healing, area in order to try to “fix” it.

This is where the Elizabethan collar (or e-collar) comes in. It was first developed by inventor Frank L. Johnson in 1962. His great moment of genius was taking a thin sheet of plastic, wrapping it around a dog’s neck, and tying it gently in place. And, in an even greater moment of genius, he decided to name it in honor of Queen Elizabeth I. This rather simple device has since evolved and continues to help prevent infections across the world. A properly fitted e-collar should extend past the muzzle of the patient and have a snug fit around the neck (you shouldn’t be able to fit more than two fingers between the neck and the collar). The collar should remain on the patient for 14 days as the incision heals.

The e-collar is not a medieval torture device meant to bruise shins and scrape paint off of your walls (although, some may view those as fringe benefits). It is a rather inexpensive tool intended to support healing and save your pet from additional, but preventable treatment. It will save you time, frustration, and money in the long run. Not to mention, it’s pretty good fun to let your pet think they are English nobility from the Elizabethan era, even for a brief moment in time.