

Q I would appreciate your advice on bark control devices. I recently purchased a bark control collar that automatically vibrates on the vocal cords of my dog as he barks. I am aware that the collar has to touch his vocal cords in order to be effective. Are these collars harmful to the dog in any way if used continuously? Please tell me if ultrasonic sound wall mounts are more effective without the collar.

A As you know, dogs bark for many reasons. These reasons include, but are not limited to, barking in play, in warning, in response to a variety of visual and auditory stimuli, and in an effort to gain attention. Barking may also be a manifestation of an underlying anxiety problem or be part of a compulsive disorder. Because of his variety of possible motivations, it is very important to understand the underlying cause of the problem before designing a treatment program. Ant-bark collars may or may not be utilized, depending on the situation.

There are three main types of anti-bark collars – electronic shock collars, ultrasonic collars, and citronella spray collars. Both the electronic shock collars and the citronella spray collars can be effective. The electronic collar does not touch his vocal cords; its electrodes must touch his skin. You are right to be concerned about the medical effects of an electronic shock collar. These collars can cause injury if the intensity of the shock is too high, including severe burns if they repeatedly shock the animal. This can happen when a dog continues barking in spite of the collar, and it can occur if the product malfunctions and repeatedly emits an electrical shock. The better and more expensive collars have a built-in program to prevent the dog from being shocked repeatedly. In dogs with an underlying anxiety problem, electronic shock collars can actually increase anxiety because they add an uncomfortable or painful stimulus to an already frightening circumstance. Many owners find that their dogs bark through the shock collar.

Based on efficacy studies done at Cornell, most owners felt that the citronella collar was more effective than the electronic shock collar. Because these collars discourage barking by emitting a burst of distasteful citronella scent, instead of causing pain as electronic shock collars do, many owners prefer the citronella collar on this basis as well.

The Cornell Animal Behavior Clinic has not found ultrasonic devices to be especially effective, either alone or in conjunction with electronic shock collars.

Unwanted barking can be a very frustrating problem, but you're on the right track by seeking advice. If you would like to speed up the progress, consider consulting a veterinary behaviorist for a thorough evaluation of your dog's specific situation. Your veterinarian can help you locate one in your area.