

E Collars and Your Pet: Cone of Shame or Best Friend?

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Ah, the dreaded "cone of shame..."

After any surgery, we strive to send your pet home with an incision that looks as nice as possible. The plastic cone or E collar (short for Elizabethan collar) was created to prevent licking. Without it, licking or chewing can cause irritation and discomfort.



At best, that may leave a hairless, discolored, ugly scar – for life.

Or it could lead to an open incision, that needs another surgery to close it up.

At worst, it can cause a serious infection.

WARNING: some pictures below might be disturbing to some sensitive readers.

Despite the stubborn urban legend that animal saliva speeds up healing, licking an incision is a sure way to slow down healing. The tongue, especially in cats, is so rough, that it can destroy healing tissue, and therefore delay healing.

Depending on the particular pet or level of discomfort, licking can lead to nibbling and chewing, especially when nobody is around to watch or distract them.

Pets have an amazing inherited skill, which allows them to chew up twenty stitches or staples in less than two seconds flat. By the time you realize it, it's too late!

Below is an example of a dog who was caught in the act. She went home with a cone that is too short, and does not prevent reaching the incision. Clearly, the correct fit is critical.



I cannot begin to count how many times pet owners have asked me if their pet *really* has to wear an E collar.

And I cannot begin to tell you how many clients thought their pet was different, or well-behaved, or well-trained, or smarter, and didn't need a cone.

Or how many pet owners were in tears after their pet chewed the incision open after they removed the cone "for only 5 minutes" or "just to give him a break" or "because she looked so sad."

Below is a (mild) example of what happens when a pet licks the incision.



I cannot begin to add up all the extra money owners have paid to fix open incisions at their vet or the emergency clinic.

And I cannot tell you how many clients swear that they will not leave their pet's side for 2 or 3 weeks. Meanwhile, I'm pretty convinced that these clients will need to sleep, or go to the bathroom, or get a bite to eat. There is no such thing as 24/7 supervision with a pet!

Depending on how bad the damage is, treatment may require rinsing the open area, cutting out damaged tissue and re-stitching the entire incision. For a little bit of perceived freedom from the evil cone, clients sometimes end up spending more money in anesthesia, surgery and antibiotics to fix an entirely avoidable problem, not to mention the discomfort the pet goes through – and a longer recovery. And ironically, then the pet needs a cone for even longer!

Below is another (mild) example of what happens when a pet licks the incision.



Leaving the E collar on at all times is the best way to get your pet used to it. If you feel bad for your pet and take the cone off, then put it back on when you leave, your pet may take it as a punishment and may try to remove or destroy it.

Patients can absolutely eat, drink, walk, pee, poop, and sleep with a cone on. In fact, the stricter you are with the cone, the quicker they will get used to it. In addition, pets do not hold grudges, so they will not be mad at you for being strict with the rules.



Collars are not to "shame" pets or annoy owners, they are essential for quicker and better healing of the incision. Call it a necessary evil or a cheap insurance policy. Next time your vet recommends an E collar or a similar device, please follow their advice. It truly is in your pet's best interest.

Moral of the story?

The plastic cone is your pet's best friend.

Any surgery has complications. Some are not predictable. Licking an incision is totally avoidable. We know how to prevent that. Please trust us, and please be part of the solution.

Your pet, in the end, will thank you for it.

What about alternatives to the plastic cone?

Marketers spend a fortune trying to convince pet owners that their alternative is better than the hard plastic cone.

There are soft cones, hard cylinders, foam “donuts,” inflatable “donuts,” various covers and sleeves and more.

As a surgeon, I have witnessed what seems like every conceivable complication.

Experience has shown me that these options are not as fool-proof as the standard plastic cone.

A stubborn or itchy pet will lick around a donut or soft collar, we see it all the time!

Bitter Apple or similar product may be placed around the incision - not directly on it. However, this does not deter some pets at all. Some actually love the taste!

So again, the hard plastic cone is your pet’s best friend... and the cheapest insurance policy against licking.