

Retracting (Extending) Leads: the untold story
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The overly excited dog stood next to his owner while children played nearby. The dog lunged, covered a couple yards and playfully nipped a child. I was attempting to read a label at my local pet supply superstore. My dog was on a short lead at my side. All of a sudden, a lone dog barreled around the corner and into us. I observed a dog and human standing on the edge of a busy street. The dog was nearly struck as he lunged almost halfway across a four-lane road. The jogger was running along a very busy road, his dog kept darting off the sidewalk and into traffic, causing many motorists to swerve dangerously. By now, you must be thinking, “Why were these dogs not on leash?” Technically, they were. However, the kind of leash used allows for very little safe control of a dog in most situations. Chances are if you are a dog owner, you may have one of these leads and use it regularly: the ever popular retracting (a.k.a. extending) lead.

What are retracting leads? They go by several brand names but have the same concept: plastic boxes with a long cable or nylon leash that attaches to the dog’s collar. Inside the unit is a mechanism that allows a cable to extend up to fifteen to twenty-five or more feet. In theory, the owner can push a button and allow the cable to extend as the dog walks away or lock it at a specific length. If the owner wants the dog closer, all he has to do is push the button and supposedly the mechanism will pull the dog back. These leads are touted as a safe alternative to allowing a dog to run loose. However, how safe are these leads? What does the average person using a retractable lead not know in regards to their safety? Let us look at some of the safety issues with retracting leads.

Retracting leads do not reel dogs in as many owners assume. The leads work by allowing a cable to extend when a lock is released and tension applied. The unit rewinds the lead only when the tension on the lead is eased. In order to get the dog closer, the dog either has to walk towards the human, stop walking and allow the owner to catch up or the owner has to perform a “retraction two-step” (lunge forward, shorten the cable, lock, release the lock, move forward, shorten the cable, lock, repeat). Even with small dogs, the tension when the lock is released is not enough to pull the dog back to the owner. If desired, the dog can keep pulling and not allow the lead to shorten. This can present a potentially serious problem.

Other concerns are the lock failing and the difficulty in holding the box’s handle. In the opening paragraph, the dog that lunged and nipped a child was on a locked lead supposedly geared for his size and breed. The lock popped when he lunged against it. No, the lead was not faulty, this thing happens quite frequently in my experience. Another problem is a finger slips and accidentally releases the lock when the owner means to set it. In addition, these leads are harder to grip than a fabric or leather loop making it easier to be yanked free. Test it, get your hand in a traditional lead loop and have someone yank it. Now do the same thing with a retracting lead. Which one can you hold more securely? . Should you be caught off guard by the lock failing and the sudden jerk of the lead as the dog hits the end of the cable, there is a better chance the box may

be ripped from your grasp. Some retractable leads now sell a fabric loop you can attach to the box for added security; however, it will not do anything to prevent the lock from slipping or the dog from maintaining constant tension.

Now it is time to look at distance. The further away a dog is from the owner, the less safe he and the public are and the less control there is over the dog's actions. I have witnessed fights when dogs on retracting lead pulled away from owners and got close to other dogs. Humans are far too slow to react when a dog lunges even when on a six foot lead. A dog can cover the distance of the cable before the human is able to attempt and lock it. In many neighborhoods where houses are close to the sidewalks, a dog has enough cable to enter yards and even get onto front steps and into trouble. A dog on a four or six foot lead is less of a risk and at less risk.

Then there is the risk these leads pose to runners, cyclists or dirt bikers on paths. It is difficult to see the cables against pavement or other darker surfaces. This poses a risk to those moving swiftly who may try to maneuver between what appears to be a loose dog and a human. A runner, cyclist or motorcycle running into a cable can cause serious injury to the rider and the dog. In addition, it is easier for a dog on a retracting lead to give chase over enough distance to catch a fast moving object even if the person is trying to go around the dog. Due to issues, many jurisdictions might have restrictions on the length of lead your dog may be on and even what type.

Finally, the cables can cause friction burns and deep slashes if pulled across skin. I have had clients who bore scars from cables that wrapped around their legs as the dogs ran. I know of a couple children requiring emergency room care after a cable was pulled across bare legs by a running dog. The Consumer Product Safety Commission has received over 30 complaints of injuries ranging from mild burns to amputation of fingers since. (Author note, this number changed based on what report was read: WKMG News 6, Orlando, Florida reported 19 since 2001 where an article in the Tallahassee Democrat from May of 2005 reported 35 complaints since 2002, data from CPSC could not be obtained at the time of writing). I also found multiple anecdotes of dogs receiving injuries when they tangled in the cable of other dogs or even their own cables.

Sadly, those selling retracting leads are often unaware of the risks and limitations. Dogs with poor leash manners are not safe on retracting leads. Since these leads offer significantly less control than a regular leash, only dogs with solid leash manners and excellent voice control under high stress conditions should ever be considered for one of these retracting leads. The risks for the type of use most owners want these leads for outweigh the benefits. A dog can get adequate exercise on walks with a four or six foot leash. I do not recommend retracting leads for use under most circumstances. Most dogs are not ready for the lack of control they offer and too many owners use the leads under conditions that are not suited for this lack of control.

Am I completely against retracting leads? No. I do suggest them under certain circumstances and advocate educated, common sense use of them. I never recommend retracting leads for general walking especially in suburban or urban areas or for taking

dogs into stores or to dog parks. In any area where control is vital or the dog may come into close contact with humans, vehicles or other animals, retracting leads should not be used. However, I have suggested them for owners who do not have a fenced backyard. Properly used, a retractable lead can allow the human to sit or stand in one spot while the dog gets a chance to poke around with less risk than if he wanders loose. Since the lead maintains tension, it will not tangle around the dog's legs as easily as a long leash. However, the constant tension can desensitize dogs to constant tension if owners do not teach good loose leash walking manners. Dogs must learn loose leash manners before using a retracting lead for anything.

I sometimes suggest retracting leads if the owner and dog are going to be in an area where the chance of encountering other humans and/or animals (domestic or wild) is very limited. If a dog has good leash manners and solid voice control, a retractable lead can allow the dog a chance to poke and sniff more without being loose. For safety sake, walk the dog to your desired spot on a regular leash and switch to the retractable (never remove one lead until the other is secured). Just be aware of the surroundings. If you see or hear others sharing the trail with you, put the dog back on the regular leash immediately. Be aware of park and/or local regulations. For example, the National Park Service has federal rules regarding leashes in all National Parks or Forests, <http://www.nps.gov>. Policy from the National Park Service is that all pets must be crated or on a lead no longer than six feet with individual park managers being able to further restrict pets in parks. Therefore, in National Parks or Forests, you cannot use a retracting lead. If caught, you could face fines.

However, for the average dog in the average neighborhood or path in a park, retractable leads are not a safe alternative. The best lead for walking is no longer than six feet. When compared to other leads (four or six foot leather, canvas or nylon), retracting leads do not offer adequate control or security for most conditions.