

# No evidence of long-term welfare problems with electronic containment of cats

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Credit: University of Lincoln

A study by animal welfare specialists has provided new evidence that using electronic containment systems to restrict where pet cats venture does not result in long-term wellbeing problems.

The use of hand-held shock collars on dogs has previously led to concerns over the welfare of animals trained using so-called 'e-collars'. However, other forms of electronic training devices for pets have received relatively little attention from researchers. These include invisible or virtual fences which deliver a static electric pulse to deter animals from crossing a boundary, such as a garden perimeter.

A new study into these systems by animal welfare researchers at the University of Lincoln, UK, is the first of its kind. The researchers found

no evidence of long-term welfare problems in [cats](#) living with these fences, compared to control cats able to roam freely in and out of their owners' gardens.

Professor Daniel Mills, Professor of Veterinary Behavioural Medicine in the School of Life Sciences at the University of Lincoln, explained:

"While some will argue that electronic containment systems can never be justified for pets, others highlight that, in the UK alone, hundreds of thousands of cats are killed and injured on roads each year and these devices can prevent these often fatal injuries and the emotional cost to the cats and their owners. In contrast, housing cats solely indoors to remove such risks is associated with increased prevalence of a range of health problems including obesity, Feline Urologic Syndrome and dental disease. Long-term exposure to common flame retardants widely used in homes may also have toxic side effects for cats."

Unlike owner-operated hand-held electronic training devices, invisible fences depend purely on the cat's behaviour for any correction and not human judgement. Modern devices train the cats to associate a warning beep with the location of the invisible fence. As a consequence animals may be able to quickly and efficiently learn appropriate avoidance behaviours, without persistent anxiety or fear of a shock.

The scientists undertook a range of behaviour tests designed to assess the mood and anxiety of cats and found that, if anything, those contained with electronic boundary systems appeared more confident when it came to new experiences.

The research, which is published in the scientific journal *PLOS ONE*, was carried out by some of the same scientists whose previous work highlighted welfare concerns relating to the hand-held devices used with dogs.

Dr Naïma Kasbaoui led the research, which was funded by the charity Feline Friends. She said: "This work is an important first step in studying these electronic containment systems. All of the cats involved in our research were well cared for and those that were contained with the electronic fencing had at least 100 square metres of external space available.

"Further work is now needed to explore the effects on cats kept in smaller enclosures, but our results should help reassure many owners looking to keep their cats safe from roads using these containment systems."

Dr Jonathan Cooper, Principal Lecturer in the University of Lincoln's School of Life Sciences, added: "Electronic training of animals can be controversial and we know that it can lead to poor welfare when used without a good understanding of pet wellbeing and training. However this new study suggests that with invisible electronic fences, at least, cats can be effectively contained without compromising their quality of life."

Provided by University of Lincoln

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