

Permanent identification of your dog

Stray dogs and cats are a big problem in many countries. In the UK alone it is estimated that more than £250 million a year is spent by local authorities, police forces and animal welfare charities rounding up and looking after stray cats and dogs. It is much harder to calculate the emotional cost to both the owner and animal when a pet is lost. Microchips are a quick and efficient way to reunite owners with their lost pets, even across international frontiers.

Why is it important to identify a dog?

Stray dogs and cats can wander over large distances and unless the animal carries some permanent identification there is no way that anyone finding it will be able to contact its owners. Animal shelters only have limited room and unless the owners come forward, it is likely that the animal will be given a new home or may eventually be put to sleep. The information stored on a microchip implant is held on a central computer (The National Register) allowing owners to be found quickly. This saves time and distress for the owners and their pets, cuts down the numbers of strays in shelters and saves money for the organisations which look after them.

Permanent identification of dogs and cats is essential for implementation of the Pet Travel Scheme (PETS). This will greatly increase the number of pets transported between the British Isles and designated countries within Europe and each has to be permanently identified so that its passport can be checked to see that it has received the necessary anti-rabies vaccinations. If there was a dispute between people with regards to who owned a particular animal, there would be no question of who was the true owner of an animal with a microchip implant.

What is a microchip?

A microchip is a small tube about the size of a grain of rice that contains a unique code (identification number); this number is registered on The National Register database and should also be noted down on your pet's vaccination record. The chip is made of an inert material which means it has no power source and won't be rejected by your pet's body. To retrieve your pet's identification number, a scanner is passed over their body, this sends out a magnetic field, which picks up the 15 number code imprinted on the chip. This code shows up automatically on the scanner's screen; the owner can be identified from this code and be contacted via the computer database.

How is a microchip inserted?

Microchips are injected under the skin at the base (scruff) of the neck with a wide-bore, sterile needle. Once the chip has been implanted by your vet, it remains in place due to its special cap that prevents movement.

Is the microchipping system foolproof?

As the code is permanently embedded on the chip there is no risk of the code being tampered with. Just as importantly, the 15 digit code gives more than enough capacity for every pet animal in the world to be given their own unique number. On rare occasions microchips may fail and the identification number will be unreadable by a scanner. If this happens, your vet will need to extract the chip and insert a new one; the new details for your pet will then be recorded on the database.

If you are planning to take your pet abroad you should make enquiries about the type of microchip being implanted in your pet. There is some international agreement on microchip standards so that microchips implanted in one country should be readable in others. If the

microchip does not conform to these standards, it may not be able to be read by a standard microchip reader when the animal is checked at the time of travel to the UK or when in a European PETS country. If your pet does not have a standard microchip you should carry an appropriate microchip reader when travelling with your pet.

Are there any alternatives to microchips?

Dogs and cats can be fitted with a collar and address tag although collars can easily become lost and the tags damaged. For many years tattoos have also been used to permanently identify an animal but this method has a number of disadvantages, namely the ink can fade and become unreadable, and the animal has to be given a general anaesthetic to keep it still when applying the tattoo. Tattoos can also be altered by further tattooing. There is also a risk of errors when writing down any long number and it may be difficult to print a long code on the skin of smaller animals.

Are there any risks to fitting a microchip?

Any pain is minor and short lived and the chip will stay under the skin surface for the rest of your pet's life. The chip is sterile and although there is a very slight risk of introducing infection this could be treated easily. Rarely, the chip can move under the skin away from the original site, but as long as the chip stays intact it can be read anywhere in your pet's body.

How can my pet be traced to me?

Once the microchip has been implanted the animal is permanently listed on a national database (The National Register), run by animal welfare charities and the Kennel Club (PetLog). The database already has details of well over two million dogs, cats and other pet animals. When an animal is found its microchip is read with the scanner and the number checked on the database. This provides information on the owner who can then be contacted and informed of the whereabouts of their pet. In the future, it is likely that microchip implants will be more widely used and more lost pets will be reunited with their owners.