

Permanent identification of your pet



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 my cat?

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 it may eventually be put to sleep. The information stored on a microchip implant is held on a central computer database (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 continental Europe. Each has to be permanently identified so that checks can be made to see it has received the necessary anti-rabies inoculations. If there was a dispute between people who each claimed to own a particular animal there would be no question of who was the true owner of an animal with a microchip implant. Microchipping your pet is not compulsory unless you plan to travel with your pet under the PETS scheme.

What is a microchip?

A microchip is a small tube about the size of a grain of rice that contains a unique 15 letter 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 letter code imprinted on the chip. This code shows up automatically on the scanner's screen; the owner can be identified from this code and can be contacted via the computer database. Microchipping your pet will cost an approximately £25.

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. Equally 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. Where possible ISO (International Standards Organisation) Standard microchips meeting specification 11784 or Annex A to 11785 should be used. It is likely that vets in Europe will have readers for these chips. 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?

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Dogs and cats can be fitted with a collar and address tag but collars can easily become lost and the tags damaged. Cats may also get their collars caught when climbing trees or squeezing through tight gaps and there is a risk of strangulation. For many years tattoos have also been used to permanently identify an animal. But this method has a number of disadvantages - 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.

Is the operation risky?

The microchip can be inserted without a general anaesthetic although a local painkiller may be useful. 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 easily be treated. The chip can rarely 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 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.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your cat please contact Orwell Veterinary Group on 01473 333677 and we will be happy to advise you.