

Microchipping Your Pet: Do It—But Have a Backup

Back in the olden days (OK, before the 1980s!) shelters that took in lost pets wished for a system of permanent identification. A pet's collars and tags could fall off or be removed—but what if all the lost animals arriving at a shelter had something more lasting, an I.D. that could help the shelter staff find the owner? That would make for a lot of happy endings!

The development of the implantable microchip seemed to provide a solution: A chip the size of a grain of rice can be placed under an animal's skin, usually between the shoulder blades. The chip contains information about the animal, so when a lost cat turns up at a shelter, staff use an electronic scanner to retrieve the information and use it to locate the animal's owner. It was a leap forward that has led to happy reunions for thousands of lost pets!

But microchipping has been complicated by the realities of business. There were competing manufacturers. Some chips operated at a different frequency. Some were encrypted.

Many of these issues have been resolved and there is a strong movement toward a universal standard. But there is still the possibility that a lost, chipped animal could be scanned with a device that will not recognize his chip. And even if the chip is read correctly, it's only as good as the information on it: Pet owners must ensure their contact information is updated with various microchip registries; there is still no single database for microchip information. If you move and fail to update your contact information, your pet could be returned to your old house rather than finding you at your new one!

What does this all mean? It's simple: Microchip your pet with the chip recommended by your local shelter or veterinarian. Make sure to update your database information if you move. But don't rely on the microchip as your only method of identification! While your local animal control agency may have a scanner, your next-door neighbor doesn't—and when your cat or dog gets loose, the people in your area have the best and earliest chance of finding her. Should your beloved pet get lost, a collar and tag are still the most reliable way to make sure she gets home again.