

MICROCHIPPING IS A MUST

Millions of dogs go missing each year. Unfortunately, very few of them are ever reunited with their owners. Many of them become and remain strays. Others are taken to pounds or shelters, where they are either adopted out to new homes or, all too often, euthanized. Now protective pet parents, no longer content with relying on collars and tags alone, have begun microchipping their dogs.

It's a simple and safe procedure. A veterinarian injects a microchip designed especially for animals -- the size of a grain of rice -- beneath the surface of a dog's skin between the shoulder blades. Similar to a routine shot, it takes only a few seconds and most dogs don't even seem to feel the implantation. Unlike other forms of identification, a microchip is permanent and, with no internal energy source, will last the life of the dog. Once it's implanted, the dog must immediately be registered with the microchip company (usually for a one-time fee), thus storing his unique, alpha-numeric code in the company's database.

Whenever a lost dog appears at a shelter, humane society or veterinary clinic, he will automatically be scanned for a microchip. If there is one, the screen of the handheld scanner will display that dog's specific code. A simple call to the recovery database using a toll-free 800 number enables the code to be traced back to the dog's owner. But in order for the system to work efficiently, all owners are cautioned to keep their contact information up-to-date.

The most complete microchips comply with International Standards Organization (ISO) Standards. These standards define the structure of the microchip's information content and determine the protocol for scanner-microchip communication. They also include the assignment of a 15-digit numeric identification code to each microchip: 3 digits either for the code of the country in which the dog was implanted or for the manufacturer's code; one digit for the dog's category (optional); and the remaining 8 or 9 digits for that dog's unique ID number.

As with anything else, however, problems can and do arise. Not all shelters, humane societies and veterinary offices have scanners. Although rare, microchips can fail, and even universal scanners may not be able to detect every microchip. Accurate detection can also be hampered if dogs struggle too much while being scanned or if either long, matted hair or excess fat deposits cover the implantation site. And because there are an ever-increasing number of pet recovery services, there is, as yet, no single database that links one to the other.

Since no method of identification is perfect, the best way owners can protect their dogs is by being responsible owners. By always keeping current identification tags on their dogs, never allowing them to roam free, and microchipping them for added protection.