

# Maximizing Microchipping

## How to Talk to Clients—and Good Samaritans—About Microchipping

by Jen Reeder

**Like most veterinarians,** Leslie Dunham, DVM, has scanned many pets for microchips. But one experience early in her career made an indelible impression: she reunited a man with a cat who had been missing for nearly three years.

“I called the owner and he was so happy that we found his cat that he actually cried on the phone,” she recalled. “When we gave the cat back to him, it was the same thing—just crying, so happy to see his cat again.”

Microchipping pets is a valuable tool for helping reunite lost or stolen pets with their families. That’s one reason why AAHA and the AVMA created Check the Chip Day: to spread awareness each year on August 15. But year-round, veterinary teams can play a key role in educating pet owners about microchips—from clients to Good Samaritans who find lost pets—in conversations that continue to evolve.

Dunham, medical director of AAHA-accredited Gentle Touch Animal Hospital in Denver, Colorado, said the majority of people who bring in puppies for initial visits have heard of microchips and are receptive to them being implanted during spay/neuter surgeries.

“I think we spend more time not so much educating them about microchipping, but about the importance of making sure that their



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contact info is tied to the microchip,” she said.

In the week of an interview for this article alone, she’d already scanned two pets found without ID tags for microchips. Both were chipped, but frustratingly, neither had contact information for the owners registered.

“It’s interesting that people tend to know what a microchip is. They just forget to tie their information to it, so it makes it useless,” she said.

Owners of unchipped adult dogs can be less familiar with the concept of microchips. She explains that it’s not a GPS—it’s just a number—and again stresses the importance of keeping contact information current with a microchip registry. Occasionally people will protest that their dog never runs away, so she’ll advise them that “It’s the one legal proof of ownership of your pet.”

For most clients, discussing microchips can build trust. To that end, Gentle Touch has microchip scanners in every exam room.

“We scan every patient every time,” she said. “Just because they have a microchip implanted doesn’t mean the chip is findable because they can migrate, so we want to be sure it didn’t migrate to somewhere a shelter might not scan. I’ve found them in limbs before. And we always want to make sure the chip is still working.”

### A Passion for Chips

Teaching veterinary students not just to implant microchips but to thoroughly scan for them is a priority for Emily McCobb, DVM, MS, DACVAA, clinical professor of

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—TOM SHARP, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF AKC

anesthesia and community medicine at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

“You don’t just scan the scruff of the neck,” she said. “You’re making sure you take the animal out of its carrier and that you check down both sides of the body in a systematic pattern just to check for any migration.”

Students do their primary care rotation in a low-cost clinic that serves low-income pet owners and learn what they’d see in general practice as well as in an animal shelter. When people bring in community cats for spay/neuter, the team always scans for microchips and discusses what to do if you find the chip number.

“We use the AAHA Microchip Registry Lookup tool because it tells you what company the number is tagged back to, and then it tells you what registry to use if it’s not popping up,” she said. “That’s what we like to show our students.”

Frequently the microchip numbers tag back to the original organization that placed the chip but not to the person that lost the animals.

“That’s always really distressing for the students,” she said. “That reinforces to them how important it is to talk to the clients about actually keeping up with the registration.”

To further reinforce that point, McCobb also asks students if they



remembered to update their own pets' microchip registration when they moved to North Grafton, Massachusetts, to attend Tufts.

With clients, she often cites the 2009 Ohio State University study that found return-to-owner rate for dogs was 2.5 times higher for microchipped dogs and a whopping 20 times higher for microchipped cats among stray pets brought to animal shelters.

When it comes up, she also reassures them that microchipped pets can still safely have MRIs, and that migrating chips don't hurt the animals—but that it's important to maintain both registrations if they need to have a second chip implanted.

McCobb and her colleagues feel so strongly about microchips that they partnered with coalition groups to make sure all animal control officers in the state of Massachusetts have microchip scanners. They also encourage animal shelters and rescue organizations to urge adopters to maintain their registries.

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“Trying to normalize it as part of a standard way that animals are identified would be helpful,” she said.

Veterinarians can work toward that goal by scanning every pet at intake, according to Tom Sharp, president and CEO of AKC Reunite, a nonprofit microchip company and pet recovery service affiliated with the American Kennel Club.

If the pet isn't chipped, it's an opportunity to discuss implanting a microchip.

“And if it is microchipped, they could say, ‘Is the microchip enrolled somewhere? Because if it's not enrolled, it's like having a Social Security card with no name on it. It's just a number,’” he advised.

Despite being an affiliate of the American Kennel Club, AKC Reunite

registers not just purebred dogs but any type of pet—currently around 35 different species are part of the registry, which reunites a pet with a family about every 15 minutes. The company calls owners and also sends text messages, emails, and letters when their registered pets are found away from home.

In one instance just last year, a veterinarian scanned a cat named Ritz who was brought in for euthanasia as an injured stray. His microchip traced back to the original owners, who expressed joy—and disbelief. Ritz had been missing for 16 years! They were more than happy to welcome the faraway feline home for his golden years.

“That was pretty amazing,” Sharp recalled.

### Legal Implications

With dog theft on the rise—particularly with French bulldogs—microchipping is key for proving ownership.

“You can't just keep a GPS collar on your dog thinking that that's going to save your dog from theft, because they're just going to throw it away,” he noted.

Registered microchips also provide proof of ownership in owner dispute cases, according to Tracy Koss, client services manager at AAHA-accredited Denver Animal Shelter, the city's municipal facility.



“We get that all the time with domestic disputes,” she said. “We’re dealing with one right now where the ex-girlfriend is trying to get back at the boyfriend by dropping his dogs at the shelter and not letting him have them.”

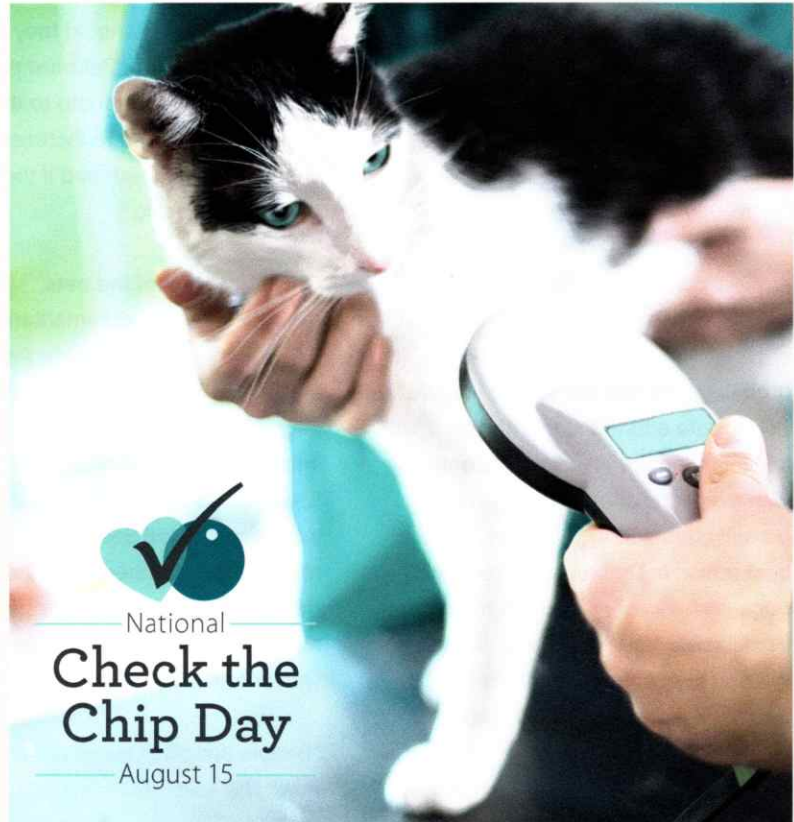
Because possession is considered ownership from a legal standpoint—she physically brought the dogs to the shelter—and none of the animals were microchipped, the man can’t simply have his dogs returned to him. In this case, the woman has been incarcerated so she won’t be coming back for the dogs, but the man has to wait until the dogs are considered abandoned and the shelter takes ownership before he can officially adopt them.

Microchips also come up in disputes between neighbors, like when someone gets annoyed by a barking dog, steals them from a neighbor’s yard, and dumps the animal at the shelter, she added.

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But microchips are primarily used to try to reunite strays brought in by animal control officers or Good Samaritans. It’s a big job: In 2022, the shelter took in 4,244 stray animals. A team of seven people works to trace ID for strays every day, seven days a week—and uses the AAHA Microchip Registry Lookup tool “all the time,” she said.

When owners can’t be immediately found, the team advises Good Samaritans to leave the pet at the shelter, where their owners will



## Celebrating Check the Chip Day on August 15

AAHA and AVMA created Check the Chip Day to remind pet owners to microchip their pets, add their pet’s information to the microchip company’s registry—and keep it up to date.

It’s also an excuse for AAHA-accredited practices to host fun celebrations with their clients! Possibilities include

- Host a Check the Chip party where pets get treats while getting scanned for free for microchips.
- Share photos on social media of pets being scanned for microchips. Note that it’s a pain-free experience!
- Offer a free bag of potato chips to people who opt to microchip their pets that day or who update their pet’s contact information with the registry.
- Make posters with printouts of happy reunion stories, either from your practice or from national news articles, like this one about a dog found 1,625 miles from home thanks to a microchip: [bit.ly/41S1WOR](https://bit.ly/41S1WOR)
- Have staff bring in photos of their own pets who are microchipped to display on Check the Chip Day or wear photo buttons.
- Distribute this flyer about Check the Chip day: [bit.ly/44hRKke](https://bit.ly/44hRKke)

For more information, visit: [avma.org/events/national-check-chip-day](https://avma.org/events/national-check-chip-day)



probably look first and where the pet will be safe and fed. While she realizes this might not be an option in shelters with overpopulation issues—and can be hotly debated in sheltering—it’s the best option in Denver to protect the dogs, and also shield “Good Sams” from liability issues that would arise if the dog jumps their fence and is hit by a car or is attacked by their own pets.

“You’re putting that Good Sam at risk, and you’re also putting that animal at risk,” she said. “The municipal shelter should be the safe haven.”

Koss said it would help shelters and animal hospitals if local governments installed self-serve microchip scanners in public parks, and if major retailers like PetSmart and Petco added them in stores next to ID tag machines. That way, Good Samaritans could easily scan pets they find and if chipped, directly return them to owners.

Petco has been working in that direction by placing microchip scanners in Petco veterinary hospitals, Vetco clinics, and many grooming salons, according to Whitney Miller, DVM, MBA, DACVPM, and chief veterinarian at Petco. (PetSmart declined to comment for this article.)

“It’s important that pet parents use collars, ID tags, and microchips to help keep their pets safe and more

easily identifiable should they ever go missing,” she said. “Pet parents can also add their pet’s photo to the Petco Love Lost database to increase the chance of being reunited if their pet ever goes missing.”

Only about half of the pets brought in by Good Samaritans to AAHA-accredited Lakeside Animal Hospital in Plantation, Florida, have microchips with up-to-date contact information, according to Beth Towing, DVM. In fact, she said sometimes Good Samaritans don’t realize that veterinary hospitals don’t automatically register pets with microchip companies, so it can be a “major teaching moment.”

“People are often surprised about that,” she said.

When owners can’t be reached, Good Samaritans sometimes become agitated if they live in an apartment that doesn’t allow pets or have another reason why they aren’t able to take the animal home with them. In those cases, Lakeside Animal Hospital will offer to take in the pet for a short time if there’s room. The team follows protocols to never share an owner’s contact information with Good Samaritans—all contact is made by staff.

While some phone calls while tracing chips end in disappointment—such as a person saying, “I haven’t had that pet in years”—others lead to gratitude and happiness for both people and pets. In fact, Towing’s mother recently found a dog on the side of the road and brought her to the practice to be scanned for a microchip. It took several days to reach the owners, but they eventually called back to set up a time to pick up their pooch.

“As soon as that dog saw those people, she lost her mind—she was just so excited,” Towing said. “So yes, I’ve seen quite a few reunion stories with microchips.”

While researching this article, Jen Reeder and a couple of neighbors found two dogs running around without collars, so they took them to a nearby animal hospital to scan for microchips. The dogs were reunited with their family thanks to one of them being microchipped. Neither of the other Good Samaritans had registered their dogs’ microchips and vowed to do so that night. ✨



### Check the Chip with AAHA

AAHA’s Microchip Registry Lookup tool is free and helps you locate the registry where a pet’s chip is registered. For more information, visit: [aaha.org/petmicrochiplookup](http://aaha.org/petmicrochiplookup)

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. While researching the article on microchips, Jen and two neighbors found two lost dogs running around without collars, so they took the pets to a nearby animal hospital to scan for microchips, which reunited the dogs with their family. The other “Good Samaritans” vowed to update



their contact information with their own dogs’ microchip registry that evening. The experience drove home the importance of Check the Chip Day and all efforts to educate the public about microchips. Visit Jen online at [www.JenReeder.com](http://www.JenReeder.com).