

Microchip scanning (dogs and cats) and microchip databases

On 6 April 2016 it became law for all dogs in the UK to have a microchip^{1 2 3}- legislation for which BVA actively campaigned. Along with other veterinary associations, BVA also supported and subsequently welcomed new legislation in March 2023 which introduced compulsory cat microchipping in England from 10 June 2024. Microchipping is a safe, effective, and permanent way to identify individual animals.⁴

Responsibilities

- It is the keeper's responsibility to ensure their dog or cat is microchipped and registered on one of the authorised commercial databases.
- It is also the keeper's responsibility to keep their contact details up-to-date on the databases.
- Where a dog or cat is transferred to a new keeper, the new keeper must, unless the previous keeper has already done so, record their details and any change in the pet's name with the database on which the pet's details are recorded. Transfer of ownership will require relevant documentation to be completed and, in some cases, the presentation of a transfer code depending on the requirements of the database.
- Veterinary surgeons are obliged to scan a dog or cat for a microchip before rabies vaccinations and the issue of a pet passport, or before completing other official documentation that requires identification of the animal (eg official health screening tests).
- Veterinary surgeons should report an adverse reaction to microchipping, or the migration or failure of a microchip to the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) via their [online form](#)⁵.

Impact of the introduction of compulsory microchipping

Defra figures published one year on from the introduction of compulsory microchipping for dogs indicated that 8 million dogs were microchipped, 3 million more than in 2013 when the plans had first been announced. At the time it was estimated that this equated to 95% of the UK dog population⁶.

Although the legislation for compulsory microchipping of cats has just come into force, we would expect to see a similar trend to the compulsory microchipping of dogs. Currently, it is difficult to obtain accurate data to estimate the total number of cats that are microchipped, as any data collected will only reflect the number of cats on a veterinary practice database or the answers of cat owners that are surveyed. VetCompass demographic data indicated that 23% of cats are microchipped⁷, SAVSNET

¹ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2015/108/contents/made>

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2016/58/contents/made>

³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2015/1990/contents/made>

⁴ To ensure effectiveness, it is important that all microchips are ISO compliant.

⁵ <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/29-microchips-microchipping-and-animals-without-microchips/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chip-your-dog-and-check-your-chip>

⁷ VetCompass. Infographics - Demographic information on UK pets: Cats. Available at:

estimates that around 40% of cats are microchipped.⁸ However, the PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report 2019 indicated that 71% of cats were microchipped.⁹

The role of vets

On admission to membership of the RCVS, and in exchange for the right to practise veterinary surgery in the UK, every veterinary surgeon makes a declaration:

" I PROMISE AND SOLEMNLY DECLARE that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to the public, my clients, the profession and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and that, ABOVE ALL, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care."¹⁰

With the declaration in mind, vets play a key role in helping to reunite lost, and sometimes stolen, animals with their owner.

Our Voice of the Veterinary Profession survey showed that in 2017 vets were seeing on average 4.1 strays each month, with 97% of practices attempting to reunite lost pets with their owners. Compared with reunification data gathered two years previously, one year before the introduction of compulsory microchipping, vets were seeing improved rates of reunification (68% managing it more than half the time, compared to 51% in 2015).

Where reunification attempts failed, most vets said it was either because there was no identifying microchip or collar/tag (50%) or the information held on the microchip database had not been kept up to date (44%).

However, the circumstances surrounding the individual cases which present themselves in veterinary practices are sometimes not clear cut and there will be a need for the vet to exercise their professional judgement, based on the information available to them. Vets must also operate within their powers, so cannot seize or hold a dog or cat suspected as stolen, nor can they share confidential ownership information as this would breach data protection laws and, in some circumstances, could put the animal, its owner, or its finder, at risk.

There has been some criticism of the profession from campaigners for compulsory scanning. Unfortunately, such campaigns misunderstand the powers of vets and the potential welfare harms of compulsory scanning to both animals and humans (eg those fleeing with their pets from domestic abuse).

Where there is an ownership dispute or an animal is suspected stolen vets should follow the [RCVS 'Client confidentiality and microchipped animals flowchart'](#)

Where, in a vet's professional judgement, a dog/cat is presented for euthanasia and destruction of the animal is not necessary on animal health or welfare grounds, [supplementary guidance to the RCVS Code of Conduct states](#):

- *There may be circumstances where a request is made by a client for the destruction of a dog or cat, where in the clinical/professional judgement of the veterinary surgeon destruction of the dog or cat is not necessary, for instance where there are no health or welfare reasons for the dog or cat to be euthanised.*
- *In relation to both dogs and cats, clients may have a contract with the shelter from which they acquired the animal such that it can be returned to that shelter, and that it may be appropriate*

<https://www.rvc.ac.uk/vetcompass/learn-zone/infographics/uk>

⁸ Sánchez-Vizcaíno, F., Noble, P.M., Jones, P.H. et al. Demographics of dogs, cats, and rabbits attending veterinary practices in Great Britain as recorded in their electronic health records. BMC Vet Res 13, 218 (2017).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12917-017-1138-9>

⁹ PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report 2019. Available at: <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/media/7420/2019-paw-report-downloadable.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/>

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to discuss this with them prior to euthanasia. Alternatively, there may be another individual willing to take responsibility for the animal (who may be named on the microchip database), and this may also be discussed with the client. If no microchip is found, this should be recorded on the clinical record.

- *In relation to cats, clients may request that a healthy cat be euthanised under the mistaken impression that the cat is a stray. It is therefore important to check whether there is another owner who has responsibility, or is willing to take responsibility, for the cat, who may be named on the microchip database.*

Note: If a member of the public finds a stray dog and cannot contact the owner, [they should report it to their local council](#).

Additional information on cat microchipping

It will not be compulsory to microchip feral or wild cats that live with little or no human interaction or dependency, with no identifiable owner. Further consideration could also be given to the use of [Trap-Neuter-Return approach](#), which we support for the purposes of population control, to manage feral cat colonies and reduce numbers in a humane manner over time. Feral cats that are neutered and released back into their environment rapidly improve in health, condition and life expectancy whilst preventing numbers in colonies from increasing.¹¹

The legislation in England sets an age limit of 20 weeks for the kitten to be microchipped. This limit allows for a veterinary surgeon's professional judgement, based on the individual kitten's size, temperament, response to handling, and opportunities to implant alongside other healthcare interventions, and any other factors deemed relevant. It is also the age at which a cat in general, can be reliably aged based in its dentition.

Scanning for microchips

We recommend that veterinary practices should scan for a microchip under the following circumstances:

- **Prior to microchip implantation** – this helps to ensure that there is no other microchip present.
- **On presentation of a lost, stray or apparently unowned animal** – this facilitates reunification with the owner when checked against the national databases, providing the owner has kept their details up-to-date.
- **On first presentation at the practice** – this ensures that the animal is correctly identified when checked against the national databases and serves as a useful reminder to the new client to ensure that they keep their details up-to-date. The microchip details should be recorded on the practice database – often lost pets are local to the practice and a check against the practice's own database can provide a quick solution.
- **Before travelling abroad** – this is to ensure that the microchip is still working and has not migrated significantly and would not normally include a check against the national database(s).
- **Before vaccinations or official certification** – vets are obliged to scan for a microchip before administering a rabies vaccination and issuing a pet passport, or before completing other official documentation that requires identification of the animal (eg official health screening tests)
- **Annually as routine** (eg at the time of the annual check-up and/or booster vaccination) – this is also to ensure that the microchip is still working and has not migrated significantly. Although it would not normally include a check against the national databases it should include a check against practice records and provides an opportunity to remind the owner to keep their details up-to-date.

¹¹ <https://www.cats.org.uk/maidstone/what-we-do/neutering-your-cat-and-why-its-so-important/trap-neuter-return-tnr>

- **On admission for treatment or hospitalisation where appropriate** – this is part of good clinical practice to ensure that the patient is matched to clinical records. This would not normally include a check against the national database(s).
- **Prior to euthanasia if considered appropriate** – this is part of good clinical practice to ensure that the patient is matched to clinical records. This would not normally include a check against the national database(s) and in many cases may not be appropriate.
- **On presentation of wildlife** – this is to identify any wild animals part of a local or national, wildlife rehabilitation or research programme.

NOTE: practices and owners should be aware that occasionally, as a result of chip or scanner failure or incompatibility, efforts to scan may not be successful.

National databases

The introduction of compulsory microchipping for cats offers an opportunity for the UK Governments to address, and learn from, the issues that are currently preventing the effective implementation of compulsory dog microchipping regulations across the UK^{12,13,14,15}. In particular, the number of separate national databases currently in existence.

To address this, in March 2024 Defra [announced](#) reforms to the pet microchipping system by making microchip records easier to access, improving the accuracy of microchip information, and standardising database operator processes. The changes include the creation of a central portal that approved users such as vets, local authorities, and police can use to search microchip records rather than having to contact separate databases individually, which delays the time taken for pets to be returned home.

For veterinary practice, cross-checking with such a large number of databases is an administrative burden which challenges already stretched vets and vet nurses, whose limited contact time with their clients and patients is better spent providing preventative healthcare advice.

For compulsory microchipping legislation to be effective, it is essential that there is one central UK microchip database that is maintained and up-to-date. However, we recognise that this may be a challenge given the proliferation of commercial databases in recent years, and so the implementation of one central UK microchip database is unlikely. Instead, we are calling for:

- All existing and future commercial microchip databases to register with [EuroPetNet](#). Petlog is currently the only UK database to be registered¹⁶.
- Improved enforcement in relation to those databases which do not meet government standards.
- Exploration of the potential for setting up a single point of entry to query existing multiple real-time databases. The facility to enter a microchip number into a single web-based portal that could check all microchip databases would minimise the need for a manual search, increasing efficiency and protecting commercial interests.
- Integration of PMS systems to single point of query to facilitate lookup of microchip numbers
- Encourage the development of notification service using the same connection as the Microchip registration PMS - Database, to notify the databases when client details are update on the PMS, subject to client consent and data protection.

¹² The Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015

¹³ Microchipping of Dogs (Scotland) Regulations 2016

¹⁴ The Microchipping of Dogs (Wales) Regulations 2015

¹⁵ The Dogs (Licensing and Identification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

¹⁶ <https://www.europetnet.com/member-organisations.html>