In addition to licensing your dog and cat, microchipping has become a standard complement to keeping your pets identifiable should they go missing. Below are some common FAQs about microchipping.

Q: What is a microchip?
A: A microchip is a small, electronic chip enclosed in a glass cylinder that is about the same size as a grain of rice. The microchip itself does not have a battery—it is activated by a scanner that is passed over the area, and the radiowaves put out by the scanner activate the chip. The chip transmits the identification number to the scanner, which displays the number on the screen. The microchip itself is also called a transponder.

Q: How is a microchip implanted into an animal? Is it painful? Does it require surgery or anesthesia?
A: It is injected under the skin using a hypodermic needle. It is no more painful than a typical injection, although the needle is slightly larger than those used for injection. No surgery or anesthesia is required—a microchip can be implanted during a routine veterinary office visit. If your pet is already under anesthesia for a procedure, such as neutering or spaying, the microchip can often be implanted while they’re still under anesthesia.

Q: What kind of information is contained in the microchip? Is there a tracking device in it? Will it store my pet’s medical information?
A: The microchips presently used in pets only contain identification numbers. No, the microchip is not a GPS device and cannot track your animal if it gets lost. Although the present technology microchip itself does not contain your pet’s medical information, some microchip registration databases will allow you to store that information in the database for quick reference.

Q: How does a microchip help reunite a lost animal with its owner?
A: When an animal is found and taken to a shelter or veterinary clinic, one of the first things they do is scan the animal for a microchip. If they find a microchip, and if the microchip registry has accurate information, they can quickly find the animal’s owner.

Q: Will a microchip really make it more likely for me to get my pet back if it is lost?
A: Definitely! A study of more than 7,700 stray animals at animal shelters showed that dogs without microchips were returned to their owners 21.9% of the time, whereas microchipped dogs were returned to their owners 52.2% of the time. Cats without microchips were reunited with their owners only 1.8% of the time, whereas microchipped cats went back home 38.5% of the time. (Lord et al, JAVMA, July 15, 2009) For microchipped animals that weren’t returned to their owners, most of the time it was due to incorrect owner information (or no owner information) in the microchip registry database – so don’t forget to register and keep your information updated.

Q: Does a microchip replace identification tags and rabies tags?
A: Absolutely not. Microchips are great for permanent identification that is tamper-proof, but nothing replaces a collar with up-to-date identification tags. If a pet is wearing a collar with tags when it’s lost, it’s often a very quick process to read the tag and contact the owner; however, the information on the tags needs to be accurate and up-to-date. But if a pet is not wearing a collar and tags, or if the collar is lost or removed, then the presence of a microchip might be the only way the pet’s owner can be found.

Your pet’s rabies tag should always be on its collar, so people can quickly see that your pet has been vaccinated for this deadly disease. Rabies tag numbers also allow tracing of animals and identification of a lost animal’s owner, but it can be hard to have a rabies number traced after veterinary clinics or county offices are closed for the day. The microchip databases are online or telephone-accessed databases, and are available 24/7/365.

Q: I just adopted a pet from the animal shelter. Is it microchipped? How can I find out?
A: If the shelter scanned the animal, they should be able to tell you if it is microchipped. Some shelters implant microchips into every animal they adopt out, so check with the shelter and find out your new pet’s microchip number so you can get it registered in your name. Most veterinary clinics have microchip scanners, and your veterinarian can scan your new pet for a microchip when you take your new pet for its veterinary checkup. Microchips show up on radiographs (x-rays), so that’s another way to look for one.

Q: I want to get my animal(s) microchipped. Where do I go?
A: To your veterinarian, of course! Most veterinary clinics keep microchips on hand; so, it is likely that your pet can be implanted with a microchip the same day as your appointment. Sometimes local shelters or businesses will host a microchipping event, too.