**MICROCHIPS: ARE PET OWNERS BEING MISLED?**

by Dogs Naturally on May 1, 2011



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Microchips are being implanted in dogs and cats by veterinarians, animal shelters and breeders for identification purposes. Microchips are also being implanted by members of the public who have taken a brief microchipping course; either online or in person.  Fish, ferrets, horses, alpacas, turtles, elephants, birds, llamas, laboratory animals, zoo animals and even snakes are being chipped. But are microchips a reliable form of identification? And are there health risks associated with the implants?

Microchip implants are marketed as a safe and permanent form of identification that lasts the lifetime of the animal. They are also marketed as a way to reunite lost or stolen pets with their owners, to significantly reduce the number of pets in shelters, to identify and punish owners of dangerous dogs; and to prevent bad breeding practices and cruelty to animals.

Reasons used to promote and sell implantable microchips may sound appealing. Before being enticed by carefully crafted advertising that is being used to not only convince people to have their animals microchipped, but also to implement mandatory animal chipping legislation, we should examine the facts.

HEALTH RISKS  
Consumers are repeatedly told that microchip implants are safe. So safe, in fact, that pharmaceutical giant Merial says scientific studies show that microchip implants are totally painless, perfectly well tolerated by the animal and that there is no risk of itchiness, allergic reactions or abscesses. Merial even claims that European experience shows that microchips are never rejected from the body.  However, published scientific studies and adverse microchip reports recorded by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) prove otherwise.

Scientific studies involving mice and rats show that test animals have developed aggressive and lethal microchip-induced cancerous growths. Scientific reports also show that chipped zoo animals have developed microchip-associated cancerous growths.  Medical reports and scientific studies also reveal that dogs and cats have developed aggressive cancerous growths at the site of their microchip implants.

In 2009, a Yorkshire Terrier named Scotty developed epitheliotropic lymphoma at the site of his Schering-Plough Home Again microchip implant. Little Scotty died within months of developing cancer; his death coinciding with his sixth birthday.  In October 2010, a lawsuit was filed in the US by Andrea Rutherford against Merck Sharp & Dohme and Digital Angel Inc. because her cat, Bulkin, developed cancer at the site of his Home Again microchip implant. The results of the lawsuit are pending.

Many advocates of microchipping say the risk that your pet will develop cancer from a microchip implant is “negligible” to “nonexistent.” Some even say that the microchip-cancer risk is an “Internet urban legend.” But ask yourself how negligible the microchip-cancer risk is if it’s your pet that develops cancer. Ask yourself why decades of scientific data prove that an object implanted in the body can cause cancer, yet nay-sayers of the microchip-cancer risk claim that microchip implants cannot cause cancer.

Animals have also experienced neurological damage as a result of microchips: “A 1.6 kg, six-week-old Tibetan Terrier was admitted with a 12 hour history of acute onset of progressive tetraparesis following insertion of a microchip to the dorsal cervical region,” write T. J. Smith and Noel Fitzpatrick of Fitzpatrick Referrals in the UK.

Animals have also died due to the microchip implant procedure. In 2004, the BSAVA reported that a kitten died suddenly when it was chipped. “During the postmortem examination the microchip was found in the brain stem,” writes the BSAVA.

In 2009, a young Chihuahua named Charlie Brown died within hours of being chipped.  Charlie died from “an extreme amount of bleeding” from the “little hole in the skin where the (microchip implant) needle went in,” says Dr. Reid Loken, the board-certified veterinarian who performed the procedure.  Lori Ginsberg, Charlie’s owner, says, “I wasn’t in favor of getting Charlie chipped, but it was the law.” Ginsberg adds: “It’s horrible to live in a country where your choices are being taken away and you are unable to make decisions about your family and your life … Politicians should not take away my right to do what is best for my pet.”

“This technology is supposedly so great until it’s your animal that dies.”  Lori Ginsberg, Charlie Brown’s owner.

When presented with cases like Scotty’s, Bulkin’s, Charlie Brown’s and others, many people justify the health risks of chipping by saying that adverse reactions to microchips are rare. The risks however, are vastly underestimated as veterinarians and animal shelters are not required to report adverse reactions so only an extremely small number of these cases are reported.

DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING  
Although microchip implants are marketed as a permanent form of identification they can stop working or be expelled from the animal’s body. Microchips are also known to migrate and become lost within the body, making identification difficult.

Also, unbeknownst to the majority of pet owners, microchip numbers can be duplicated:  more than one animal can have the same identification number. Barbara Masin of Electronic Identification Devices, Ltd states: “I went to the USDA listening sessions and offered to show them the problem with duplication possibilities, but they didn’t want to see it. The situation is very political”.

“There are certain people involved within the USDA who have very close ties to certain manufacturers. There is an underlying agenda, unfortunately, and this is not for the good of the country.”  Another well-known slogan used to sell microchips is: “Microchips help reunite lost and stolen pets with their owners.” But this catchy phrase is deceptive and provides a false sense of security for pet owners who believe that their pet’s chip can be read by all microchip scanners.

Dr. Patricia Khuly, VMD of the Sunset Animal Clinic in Miami, Florida warns: “… not all scanners are created equal. Some are better than others at reading a wide variety of microchips. That means your pet may get lost, found, scanned and euthanized if the scanner comes up ‘empty.’”

Tragically, an 8 month old American Pit Bull Terrier named Hadden was euthanized at the Stafford County, Virginia, Animal Shelter after the scanner used to read his chip could not detect the implant.  Lisa Massey, Hadden’s owner, says, “They [shelter employees] just explained that they were very sorry … that they had scanned Hadden twice and nothing registered.” Even under ideal controlled conditions, no scanners have 100% sensitivity for all microchips.

Another important point that pet owners must be aware of pertains to recovering their stolen microchipped pet. Specifically, if your chipped pet is stolen, the chip does not guarantee that you will find your pet. Also, recent cases in the UK reveal that the chip does not provide proof of ownership. So, even if you locate your stolen, microchipped pet, it is possible that your pet will not be returned to you. In April 2010, Dave Moorhouse was contacted by Anibase, a microchip database company, asking if he wanted to change the ownership records of his Jack Russell Terrier, Rocky. Mr. Moorhouse told Anibase that Rocky had been stolen and asked where he was but Anibase refused to provide information regarding Rocky’s whereabouts.

Steven Wildridge, managing director of Animalcare, the company that owns and operates Anibase, says: “This is not a choice, it’s an obligation under the Data Protection Act.  If the individuals involved do not want us to pass on their details to the original owner then we cannot do so unless compelled to following a criminal or civil proceeding.”

Although Rocky’s microchip was registered to Mr. Moorhouse, the police concluded there was no criminal case and refused to help him find Rocky. A Huddersfield County Court judge ruled that the situation was out of his jurisdiction. Mr. Moorhouse asks, “What’s the point of having your pet microchipped if you can’t get him back?”

Those who promote and/or profit from microchips also claim that microchipping will significantly reduce the number of pets in shelters. This claim is not substantiated by accurate, long-term, independent studies. In fact, in the few short-term studies that used carefully selected animal shelters to test microchips, scanners and databases, researchers noticed “… microchipping … is not an infallible system, and it is not realistic to expect 100% performance.”  
Implantable microchips are also promoted for use in dangerous dogs so their owners can be identified and held responsible for their dog’s bad behavior. The limitation is owners of dangerous dogs will probably find a way to avoid having their dogs chipped. Owners of “dangerous” chipped dogs can also easily have the chip removed, either surgically or by some inhumane method, in order to avoid being identified.

Microchips are also promoted as a way to prevent bad breeding practices and cruelty to animals. A proposal has been made in Wales to implement mandatory chipping of dogs in breeding premises. RSPCA inspector Richard Abbott says the charity has found dogs in “dark, damp, ammonia-smelling” conditions with “no bedding whatsoever” and with “puppies dead or dying next to them.”

Unfortunately, compulsory chipping will not prevent bad breeding practices, unhygienic conditions or cruelty to animals by bad breeders, those involved in puppy mills, or anyone else for that matter. Instead, it is likely that chips and insertion devices will be purchased via the Internet to reduce costs, and the implant procedure will be done by insensitive, untrained individuals in stressful and unhygienic conditions. As a result, puppies will suffer and/or die due to infections, abscesses, bleeding, neurological damage and cancer caused by the implants. Meanwhile, the conditions in which the dogs and puppies live will remain the same.

“There have been concerns about the implanted chip causing problems; various Internet ‘urban legends’ have tried to link microchips and a rare form of cancer. To date, we are not aware of any scientific data confirming this. In our opinion, the risk is negligible to nonexistent.” Dr. Ellen Friedman DVM: Newburgh Veterinary Hospital; Newburgh, NY.

CONCLUSION  
Real-life evidence shows that microchip implants are an unreliable and potentially dangerous form of identification. In spite of the risks, microchip companies and advocates of microchipping continue to mislead pet owners by saying that microchips are reliable and safe. In addition, mandatory animal microchipping legislation continues to be enacted around the world.

It is important, therefore, that pet owners educate themselves regarding problems associated with microchips, and share the information with other pet owners, veterinarians, animal shelters and those involved in microchipping policies. Pet owners should also become involved in the process of reporting adverse microchip reactions, otherwise adverse consequences of microchipping will continue to be grossly under-reported.

It is important that pet owners work together to reverse mandatory microchipping legislation and prevent further microchipping legislation from being enacted.

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