Don't Skip the Equine Chip:
A review of new equine microchip regulations

By Amy Van Gels, DVM

Microchip implantation in horses has gained considerable traction in recent years. As myths regarding microchips have been disproved, attitudes regarding microchipping among horsemen have improved dramatically. Horse owners now have a heightened awareness regarding the safety, reliability, and ease of implantation of microchips.

Margaux Buchanan, DVM, from South Shore Equine Clinic and Diagnostic Center in Plympton, Massachusetts, has noticed a shift in attitudes about microchips among her clients. "My clients frequently ask for microchips, and they respond positively when I recommend them. Just last week, we implanted 5 chips at one barn, and our practice implanted about one hundred last year, especially during annual spring vaccines." Dr. Buchanan believes this change may have occurred in part because clients have more confidence that the chip won't break or migrate and have fewer reservations about the size of the implanter needle. "I use a local block before implanting microchips. Clients are pleased with how well horses tolerate the procedure."

Sporting organizations, governmental groups, and breed registries are also taking note of the advantages that microchips offer for positive identification. Many are changing their policies to require microchipping. The US Equestrian Federation (USEF), the United States Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA), and the Jockey Club all have new regulations. The Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) and the British Show Jumping Association are international sporting groups that require microchips. Breed registries, such as Rheinland Pfalz-Saar International and the Oldenburg Horse Breeders' Society, also have microchip requirements.

Dr. Buchanan has seen an increase in awareness among her clients about these new regulations. "I see a lot of horses that compete. Their owners are aware of the new rules and are asking for microchips."

Because the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) classifies microchipping as veterinary procedure, implantation must be performed by, or under the supervision of, a veterinarian. This article reviews the new regulations to help veterinarians stay abreast of the new rules.

Microchipping Protocol
Ensure the identity of the horse.
Scan for an existing chip with a universal scanner.
Shave and disinfect the implantation site. Utilizing a local block can help alleviate patient discomfort. Consider mild sedation for especially fractious horses.
Scan the chip prior to insertion. Verify that it does not start with 900, 911, or 999, and check that it matches paperwork.
Implant the microchip into the nuchal ligament, halfway between the poll and the withers, on the horse's left side.
After insertion, scan the injection site with a universal reader to confirm the placement and number of the chip.

USEF and USHJA

To better trace a horse's competition history and to positively identify horses, the USEF requires that USHJA-registered horses must be microchipped. The rule consists of two phases. As of December 1, 2017, horses that do not have a microchip *cannot receive points and/or prize* money for any Hunter, Hunter Breeding, Jumper, and Hunter/Jumping Seat Equitation classes not restricted by breed. After November 30, 2018, horses without a microchip *will not be able to compete in* any Hunter, Hunter Breeding, Jumper and Hunter/Jumping Seat Equitation classes not restricted by breed USEF-licensed competitions.

It is important to note that the USEF states that microchips must have 15-digits and comply with ISO standard 11784 and 11785. The microchip should be implanted in the nuchal ligament on the left-side of the neck, halfway between the poll and the withers. Michelle Bray, the Managing Director of Customer Care and Horse Services at the USEF, states, "In addition, the USEF strongly encourages that the microchip be registered by the International Committee for Animal Recording (ICAR) so that it does not have duplicate number or a shared code. At this time, we are considering a rule change to include specific microchip criteria to exclude any chance of duplication."

Until such a rule is in place, veterinarians should avoid utilizing microchips that begin with the numbers 900-, 911-, or 999-. Microchips that start with 900- are very difficult to trace to a specific provider, those that begin with 911- are not recognized by ICAR, and microchips that start with 999- are test chips not intended for use as positive identification. Utilizing microchips from a reputable company, such as Datamars™, can ensure that an appropriate chip is used.

The Jockey Club of America

The Jockey Club has also passed new microchipping requirements. All Thoroughbred foals of 2017 and later now need to be microchipped. The microchips must be inserted prior to or at the same time as registration, when a DNA sample and photographs are taken and the horse's official markings are recorded. At least one photograph of the scanned microchip number also needs to be submitted to the Jockey Club. The Jockey Club states that the microchip provides "an additional layer of confidence" in positively identifying the Thoroughbred. Similar to the USEF, the Jockey Club requires an ISO 11784/11785-compliant microchip to be implanted in the nuchal ligament on the left side of the neck, halfway between the poll and the withers.

Governmental Regulations

Microchip regulations do not just apply to sporting horses. Governmental groups are beginning to rely on microchipping for positive identification and to trace disease outbreaks. The state of Louisiana mandates that horses are positively identified with a microchip as part of its Coggins testing policy. Since 2009, the European Union has required a microchip for all horses older than 6 months of age. The United States government requires that horses be positively identified for interstate transportation but does not yet have a microchip requirement. Because microchips are less painful than branding or tattooing, they are an obvious recommendation for horses that do not have another form of identification.

Even though more and more organizations now require microchipping for positive identification, it is not just these horses that are receiving microchips. Dr. Buchanan says that she recommends them for all horses, even those that never leave their owner's backyard. Microchips can help reunite owners with their horse in the event that it is stolen or lost, especially after a natural disaster. Because of their traceability, they can also help deter theft. Similarly, they can help prevent fraud and improve confidence during a transfer of ownership. Because of these reasons and the new regulations discussed, microchips are being used much more frequently across all categories of horses.

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