

lost dog!

what to do if you lose or find a dog

For many people, dogs are more than just pets. They're members of the family. Losing a dog can cause panic, fear and heartache. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, but even the best intentions aren't always enough. How do you locate your lost dog? What should you do if you find a dog? Every situation is different, but here are some basic tips to help you.

An ounce of prevention:

There is no foolproof way to assure that your dog will never get lost. Even indoor dogs can slip out, either through an open door or window or from the car when taking a trip. Make certain that your dog always wears some form of identification, such as a tag, microchip or tattoo.

If your dog gets away:

Post signs on your street, major cross-streets, schools and veterinary clinics. Use big, dark letters on a light background. Keep the information short and easy to read while driving. For example, a sign that reads, "Lost: Big Brown Dog 555-1212" covers the most important facts.

Talk to your neighbors, especially those who are home all day or work a different shift than you do. Make sure they know that your dog is missing and what they look like.

Spread the word to neighborhood children. They are amazingly observant and are often willing to hunt around for missing pets. Be sure to warn them if your dog is shy or distrustful of strangers or children. In that case, have the children come get you if they find your dog rather than trying to catch the dog themselves.



Developed with and approved by a qualified veterinarian.

Visit local parks and talk to workers there. The activity and food that is often found in parks may attract a scared, lonely and hungry pet. Also, people who spend time outdoors are more likely to see your dog than those who stay indoors.

Run a “lost” ad in the local and regional paper. Many papers offer this as a free service. These papers tend to cover large areas, and your pet may end up far from home.

Visit shelters in the area, starting with those closest to your home. Check at least every other day. Shelters are so full that pets may be kept only a few days before they are euthanized. File a report with each shelter but continue checking each one since they may be overwhelmed with lost pets and unable to check every file.

If you have Internet access, log onto Petfinder.com. You can place a free “lost dog” classified ad there and check ads placed by people who have found dogs. While you can use this site to search local shelters, it may take several days for a shelter to post a newly found dog. You are better off calling or visiting each shelter in person.

Post signs at Petco stores, veterinary offices, boarding, grooming and training kennels in the area. Include a photo if possible. Talk to the staff so they’ll remember you. Also call local pet sitters.

If your dog is a purebred, contact local rescue groups for your breed. The shelter usually keeps a list of organizations in the area. They may also have other rescue groups that they would be able to refer you to.

Be patient but proactive. If your dog has a microchip or other identification information, you have a much higher chance of finding your dog or having them returned to you.

There are also new products for your dog that have GPS locators to help find them if they get away.

If you find a dog:

Always use caution when approaching a strange dog. If a dog seems afraid or backs

away, leave them alone. Let them approach you.

Don’t go near a mother dog with puppies. She will try to protect her puppies from strangers, and even a normally friendly dog could bite.

Stay away from a dog that is cornered. The dog may bite to protect themselves because they can’t get away. They don’t know you won’t hurt them.

Call Animal Control if you do not feel comfortable approaching the dog, or if the dog seems aggressive.

Letting the world know:

Post “found” signs on all nearby and major cross-streets, facing in all directions. Don’t give too much information. You want the pet parent to be able to describe the dog to you.

Make a personal visit to Animal Control and read the forms that pet parents who have lost pets fill out. The staff can also scan the dog for a microchip, as can most veterinarians and animal shelters.

Run “found” ads in the local and regional paper. These ads are often free of charge. Go online to Petfinder.com to place a free “found” classified ad. Post signs at Petco stores, veterinary offices, boarding, grooming and training kennels in the area. Also call local pet sitters.

Caring for a lost dog:

Put an ID tag on the dog with your phone number on it. You can purchase an instant ID tag at Petco. A frightened dog in a new place is more likely to escape and get lost. Your neighbors won’t recognize a strange dog running loose.

For health and safety reasons, keep the lost dog separate from any of your own pets. Provide the lost dog with shelter and water. If they are in your care for longer than 12 hours, you will also need to provide food.

If no one answers:

If you can’t find the pet parent, turn the dog in to a shelter. Even if the pet parents never

find you, they will probably be searching the local shelters. If you want to adopt the dog, most shelters will give you the first chance if the dog isn't claimed. If the pet parents call you after turning the dog in, refer them to the shelter.

Many people who find lost dogs decide to keep them. Consider this option very carefully before deciding it's the right one for you. Do you have enough space, time, money and emotional resources for this dog? Do you know how to work with dogs that have lost their home or never knew one, or are you willing to seek the help of someone who does?

Local laws vary as to how long you must have a dog before it is legal to keep the animal for yourself. Animal Control or the police department can tell you about laws in your city. Don't get the dog spayed or neutered until they are legally yours. The pet parent may not reimburse you if you pay for medical care.

Don't assume the dog has been abandoned or abused. Try to find the pet parent. They may be out of town, so give them a fair chance to find their beloved canine companion.

Note: The information on this Care Sheet is not a substitute for veterinary care. If you need additional information, please contact your veterinarian.