

Counter Surfing

The Motivation

Counter surfing is often viewed as a nuisance behavior and is unfortunately easily reinforced. It often does not take more than one instance of a dog finding food on the counter for them to continue to get on the counter to look. Occasionally, the behavior may pop up from boredom, but often needs to be solved by implementing management once your dog has patterned it. While a dog's size may affect their ability to counter surf, small dogs are not exempt from finding creative ways to get on the counter or tables.

Prevention & Management

The most effective way to stop counter surfing is preventing the behavior from occurring. This can be done by putting up physical barriers such as ex-pens or baby gates to block off the kitchen or by keeping your dog supervised and/or tethered to you when they are out of their kennel. Since the behavior is reinforced by finding things on the counter, the behavior may also decrease if there is nothing on the counter for them to get. If there isn't anything good for the dog to find then the dog will have less reason to go on the counter. By clearing the counter but not preventing access, you may notice an extinction burst in the behavior. Since the behavior has previously been reinforced, the behavior may occur in greater frequency in response even when reinforcement has ceased. Similar to when the car doesn't start when we turn our key. We don't just walk away from the car; we sit there and turn the key repeatedly frustrated that the car isn't starting. Your dog may do the same thing with jumping on the counter.

Your dog plays the lottery every time they counter surf. Most of the time it may not pay out, but when it does, it pays out well so they keep coming back for that chance.



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Problem Solving

Since counter surfing is so easily reinforced, we must find ways to prevent reinforcement from occurring when the behavior is performed or prevent the dog from performing the behavior.

1. Put up secure barriers blocking off either the counter or the entire kitchen. Some dogs may begin jumping at the barriers in attempts to still get onto the counter or into the kitchen, so it is important to be aware that many barriers are infallible and can get knocked down or jumped over.
2. Remove anything your dog may find reinforcing from the counter. Depending on the dog, this may include everything from food that normally may sit on your counter to mail and paperwork.
3. Tether the dog to you or to a secure post like a chair leg or other piece of furniture so the dog is not out of eye sight when out of their kennel. The leash used to tether the dog is not meant to be used for corrections if the dog does something wrong but rather as a way to keep the dog successful by keeping them away from areas with tempting things.

Important Notes

Positive punishment such as verbal or physical reprimands are counterproductive to eliminate counter surfing. By shouting at your dog, physically correcting your dog, or using aversive equipment (shock collars, noise makers, etc), you risk fallout and undesirable side effects. It can also lead to the dog becoming fearful or aggressive in the areas they are receiving punishment. Some forms of punishment will only work when you are there to administer the punishment which can lead to a negative association with your presence. We want to teach the dog what we do want them to do, so try to be proactive in rewarding your dog before they jump on the counter or for an incompatible behavior such as laying down next to the counter.



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