

How to Prevent Counter-Surfing

Do you live with a Filching Fido? The dog that calculatedly notes when you're not in the kitchen (or maybe when you are!) and brazenly swipes a stick of butter or sirloin steak off the counter? That dares to sneak your dinner off the table when you're not looking? If you're fed up with your dog's "counter-surfing" behaviour, here's what you can do to change it.

First, understand what's going on. Your dog's not being "bad" — canines are opportunists. And what better opportunity than food that's up for grabs? *It's there, it smells fabulous, I'm taking it!* When they succeed and scarf down their prize, they are reinforced to counter-surf again. To break the cycle, you need to better manage the situation and train your dog to offer a different behaviour.



Preventing counter-surfing

The simplest way to prevent counter-surfing is to eliminate the opportunity for your dog to practise it. That means removing the temptation.

- Don't leave food unattended; put it in the fridge or kitchen cupboards beyond your dog's reach.
- Make sure to clean crumbs and food spills off all surfaces.
- If you have to step away from the kitchen or dinner table while food is out, call your dog to accompany you. If there are doors to the room, close them. Or put up a barrier, such as a baby gate.

Teach a positive interrupter

If we catch our dog in the act of counter-surfing, poised to grab food off a surface, we can stop them from completing the behaviour by using a positive interrupter. This is a sound we teach the dog that means "disengage from what you're doing and be rewarded with a fabulous treat." It can be a kissy sound, a tongue click, a whistle, it doesn't matter as long as the dog associates it with stopping what they are doing in return for a reward. At first, you'll need to train your positive interrupter with a variety of simple distractions or objects of low value to your dog. For example, if they pick up a stick outside, make your kissy sound and reward them when they drop it and pay attention to you. Once they can be reliably redirected from easy distractions, then you can move on to using the positive interrupter with objects of greater value to them, such as the roast chicken on the counter.

Teach "leave it"

Most people teach their dog a "leave it" cue that you can use to pre-empt all kinds of behaviour, including counter-surfing. If your dog doesn't know the cue, please refer to our info sheet [Leave It](#). Make sure when cuing that your tone is cheerful, not punitive.



Teach “off”

If your dog puts their paws on the counter looking for food, put a treat in front of their nose and lure them to the floor, saying “Off.” The second their paws touch the floor, click or say “Yes!” and feed them the treat. Repeat this sequence whenever they try to put their paws on the counter. Once you’ve done it about 5 times, stop using the food lure and say “Off” as soon as they put their paws on the counter. If they move back to the floor, say “Yes!” and deliver the treat. If they don’t move to the floor, then you may need to take a step back and resume using the food lure till they fully understand the verbal cue.

Train a place cue

It would be most polite if your dog didn’t lurk at the counter but could lie quietly on a mat either in the kitchen or just outside the door while you prepped the fixings for your meal. To teach them to use a mat and stay there, please refer to our info sheet *Teaching a Place Cue*. Start by teaching your dog to go to place (the mat) without any people-food in sight. Make sure you use high-value treats as a reinforcer. Put your dog’s mat in the kitchen or just outside the door. Once the dog is going to the mat reliably on cue, begin to add duration. Instead of clicking and treating as soon as they lie on their mat, wait a second, then click and reward. Gradually work your way up to a duration of 30-40 seconds on the mat. (This may or may not take more than one training session.)

Now try asking your dog to go to their place while you’re prepping food. Since we’re adding a new level of distraction, drop your criterion of 30-40 seconds’ duration to 5 seconds and mark and reward. Start building up the duration to 30-40 seconds. (This may or may not take more than one training session.)

When your dog reaches 30-40 seconds of duration on the mat while you prep food, try leaving the room for a few seconds. If your dog is still in place on your return and the unattended food is untouched, mark and treat! As above, gradually increase the duration of your absences.

Your dog learns that the most reliable way to get a tasty treat is by offering an alternative behaviour. It may take a while to eliminate their counter-surfing, depending on how long and how often they’ve been reinforced by their efforts. So, continue to be vigilant about putting food away when you’re not actively training. Eventually, your dog’s counter-surfing will be a thing of the past!

References

<https://resources.bestfriends.org/.../dog-counter-surfing-prevention-and-deterrents>

<https://www.clickertraining.com/how-to-put-an-end-to-counter-surfing>

