

Counter Surfing

Why Dogs Counter Surf

Dogs are scavengers, so reaching up to get something that nobody else is using or eating is perfectly normal dog behaviour. However, it is inconvenient, to say that least, to have a dog that interferes with cooking, not to mention that it can be dangerous if the dog gets into some food that is poisonous to dogs.

To fix it, we apply the [Three Steps of Behaviour Modification](#) (pdf).



1. Management

- A) Counter surfing can be a sign of boredom, stress, lack of appropriate chewing items, or lack of supervision. => Make sure your dog gets daily social stimulation (play with other dogs) and [mental stimulation](#) (link to Cowichan Canine). You can ask your instructor for more help with this.
- B) Unless you have an open-plan home, you can keep the door closed to the kitchen or a baby-gate in the doorway, so that your dog does not have access to the kitchen counters (when you are cooking, or all the time).
- C) If you have an open-plan home and your dog is happy in his crate, you can crate him with a yummy, stuffed Kong while you are cooking.

2. Remove the Reward the Drives the Behaviour

If Management fails, make sure that there is no reward associated with the behaviour. This includes:

- A) Make sure the counters are clean AT ALL TIMES, so that your dog never gets a chance to be rewarded for the behaviour by finding something to eat. THIS IS CRITICAL, because if your dog's counter surfing sometimes is successful, we have now taught him to gamble – sometimes, he wins! That makes the behaviour [very resistant to extinction](#) (link to article by Eileen Anderson).
- B) If the dog gets up on the counter while you are cooking, make sure he cannot get hold of anything, but otherwise ignore him. Yes, you read that right – IGNORE him! Do not correct him, do not tell him to get down or in any other way give him any attention – don't even look at him! In this situation, we want him to learn that there is never anything there for him. If we remove him from the situation by correction, pushing him off, etc., we are of course preventing him from getting something, but we are also robbing him of the opportunity to learn that there is never anything there for him – instead, he is going to want to try again. Giving him this learning opportunity is important for the development of a reliable off-the-counters dog. The most important part, however, is step number 3:

3. Teach Him What You Want Him To Do Instead

This is the most important part of the whole protocol.

Teach your dog to stay on the floor simply by rewarding him for being on the floor, the behaviour of counter surfing becomes obsolete. *"Why waste energy on counter-surfing, when it never gets me anything?"*

Whenever you are working in the kitchen, look out for where your dog is and what he is doing:

- Is he in the kitchen, but not on the counter? Reward that with a treat!
- Is he on his way over to you, perhaps to jump on the counter? Catch him with a treat BEFORE he gets up on the counter!

How Long Will It Take?

This depends on a number of factors, including:

- How long your dog has been practicing the behaviour and how many times he has been rewarded (and/or punished) for it; and
- How patient and consistent you can be in the implementation of this protocol.

Your Reward

If you implement this protocol correctly, you could end up with a dog that did what my 11 months old Bernese Mountain Dog, Connie, did: after four months' implementation of this counter surfing protocol, I left a block of cheese on the counter while taking the compost bucket outside..... I came back to a heavily drooling dog sitting under the block of cheese! Of course, I cut off a large piece of the cheese for her as reward! She is now almost five years old, and she has not been up on the counters ever since then.

