

COUNTER SURFING

How do you stop your dog from scavenging food from your kitchen counter? This undesirable behavior is also known as "counter surfing". The answer is "Watch the dog!" Until your dog understands house rules, the first rule to training a good dog is "watch the dog".

Counter-surfing is a management and training issue. Remember - watch the dog! If you forget to watch the dog, roll up a section of newspaper, secure it with a rubber band, grasp it firmly in your hand and hit YOURSELF on the head repeatedly while saying, "I forgot to watch the dog! I forgot to watch the dog!"

Dogs are not complicated. They like to eat and play. The dog sees food and eats food. If food were never on the counters the dog would quit looking for food on them.

I devote myself to keeping my new puppy "Dazzle" under supervision for the first nine months of her life. Whenever I'm in the kitchen, I want my puppy to lie quietly while I'm doing my chores. I will leave a tag line* on her just in case she tries to jump up. Then if she starts to jump I can step on the lead and she won't be able to complete the jump. When her feet are back on the floor, or even better when she lies down again, I quietly praise her and give a small food treat or something good to chew on. I try to make being on the floor of the kitchen a great place to be. If you have a really big dog then tether him to something he can't move but close enough that he can smell and see whatever food you are making.

It only takes a couple of days before the puppy is offering to lie down as soon as I go into the kitchen. Then I just toss her bits of her food every once in a while (not from the table). I keep one eye on her the whole time and if I see the nose go up, I watch for the gathering of muscles that means she is about to explore and say "Leave It!" in a nice tone. The pup is then distracted and looks at me. I reinforce her with a tidbit that I have ready. During that time I NEVER leave her unsupervised unless the kitchen countertops are clear of food, the dishwasher door is closed, there are no dirty dishes with lick-able food, and the garbage can is out of reach. Yes, I have an open kitchen; yes, it's a hassle, but if you can get this groundwork in, you don't have a lifelong counter surfing problem to deal with. If I don't have time to watch the dog, then she is in her crate with something good to chew on.

I use the same method with the adult shelter dogs that I bring into my home. The system for training dogs to have excellent house manners is prevention, supervision and rewarding alternate behaviors. Most of the shelter dogs are great counter surfers because no one has taken the time to teach them anything else. Remember, dogs do what works and if taking something off the counter gets them a great treat then why not do it! But if you change the rules and help the dog understand that he/she will be reinforced for not counter surfing then you will succeed.

You can also practice by holding your dog on a lead and walking by some food on a

coffee table (but make darn sure the dog can't ever reach the food). Stop just short of the dog being able to reach the food. As soon as the dog looks back at you because you stopped, take a step back, and offer the dog a treat. Repeat this many times until the dog won't even look at what's on the table. Put the dog in the crate and remove the items till the next time you can practice.

Don't ever leave a young or new dog in the kitchen with food on the counter! Not ever!!! Behavior that is reinforced is most likely to be repeated. If the dog finds wonderful food on the counter and gets to eat it, you have let your dog get reinforced for counter surfing. If you can't watch the dog, crate the dog or keep him with you. It is as simple as that.

Your dog needs to learn that even sniffing for what is on the counter is off limits, and that Mom or Dad have more fun stuff for being on the floor and doing good things.

I currently live with 4 dogs, ages 15yrs to 7 1/2 months. All of them understand that stuff on the counter is off limits and far less interesting than I am, with my tricks and treats! They want to be good because good is fun! If your dog becomes a counter surfer, it is because you allowed it to happen! Don't let bad habits get started! Watch your dog!

*A Tag line is a short leash for management purposes. It should be long enough that you can easily pick up and or step on it. Inside 3-6 feet long should do for most breeds. (Outside 30+ feet)

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