

Counter Surfing Solutions

By Chris Puls
www.DogScouts.org



This is an issue that can have costly consequences. Costly due to the loss of food, but potentially costly in vet bills if your dog gets something he shouldn't. Because dogs repeat behaviors that get them what they want, counter surfing can be a hard habit to break! If the dog has ever gotten a big reward (found tasty morsels on the counter) then odds are good the counter surfing behavior will continue.

While prevention (making sure counters are kept free of food) can be one solution, it often fails. This is because it only takes one time of forgetting to put something away or getting distracted "for just a moment" and the dog gets rewarded again. These intermittent rewards are like slot machine jackpots! There's a reason those machines are addicting. The anticipation of getting a reward is almost as strong of a reward as actually getting one.

So let's look at some other ways...

1. Another method of prevention is to make the kitchen and any food areas off-limits to the dog. If you are good about closing doors or gates and the dog is good about respecting those this might work. But it's not a very convenient way to live. And without training, the dog will always be trying to find a way back into the "casino."



2. An alternative is to be sure the dog is confined to a crate, play room or outside if he can't be monitored (or tether the dog to you so he can't sneak off to check a counter). A solution that's likely to work, and a good way to temporarily prevent accidents while you are working on the training below...

3. If the issue of counter (or table) surfing only happens during food prep or meals when people are present, this is the easiest to fix. You'll want the behavior of staying out of the area to be more likely to get tasty rewards than the behavior of jumping up.



He loves his bed so much he won't give it up even though he has outgrown it!

Get the dog a comfy bed, set it on the floor outside the food area and teach the dog to go to his bed using the steps in this video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwAmbObAXcY>

Then, when the dog LOVES his bed, you can start rewarding the dog for going to his bed while you are prepping food or eating! Start with short durations, and gradually wait longer and longer to toss a treat his way.

It won't be long before the dog races over to his bed when he sees you go to the kitchen or sit down to eat.

4. If your dog mostly checks for prizes when you are absent, he likely knows that checking when you are present could be dangerous for him! This could be because he

has been yelled at or because you have tried one of the many punishment based methods for "breaking" this behavior.



Sarah has a pretty unique view of counter surfing that might work for you too!:



I have a pretty hard-core counter surfer at my house too...There was just that one time someone left a whole plate of cornbread out when she was about 9 months old and that was it. A full dose of Jack-Pot-At-Las-Vegas- One-Trial-Super-Learning event that I just don't think she's ever going to get over. (Bad humans!)

"Even after a year of never achieving so great a coup du scarf again, just a few crumbs here and there now and then, the behavior really hasn't diminished. So, being the good behaviorist I decided to try and figure out exactly what was continuing to reinforce it in spite of all our strict precautions. In an attempt to experience the kitchen from Zoë's perspective, I got down on all fours and crawled around for a bit. (Very professional, I know).

First of all, when you are a dog, the edge of the counter looms enticingly overhead, but everything else is a mystery. And even though I had just been upright a second before and knew that all there was up there was a clean cutting board, coffee maker and toaster oven, my first thought as a dog was "I wonder what is up there now?"

This made me think about how you can play peek-a-boo with babies forever and they are always surprised when you suddenly reappear. So even if Zoë has stood up and checked the counter just a minute or two previously, by golly, something may have changed and she is pretty convinced it is necessary to check it again. To a dog it is a whole new world each and every minute. So one of these minutes, heck who knows, she might be right. Installing a glass counter top with see through panels might help because then the dog could see there was nothing up there and wouldn't bother...but I suppose that would be pretty impractical for most people. :)



My conclusion: No matter what you do (rat traps, spray bottles, pennies in a can, a strict clean up policy) counter surfing is still reinforced by that peek-a-boo glimpse (plus, don't forget, some pretty amazing smells), up over the edge at what my boyfriend likes to call "the realm of the gods." --that strange flat, infuriating surface just barely out of reach, where the cruel humans daily flaunt before them some of the greatest treasures in the world (i.e. pancakes, sliced cheese, peanut butter sandwiches, etc).

How is this helpful? Well, now that I understand her better I don't get quite as frustrated anymore, and changing my own perspective about how my dog is behaving really is often half the battle....She's not trying to be a pest. She's just a dog living in the moment, constantly tempted by the great mystery above. Any self respecting person with a shed of curiosity would do the same. If you found a \$100 bill in a trash can one day, I dare you to not go check it again the next.



*Oh, and there is a solution I've found. It doesn't eliminate the counter surfing and we still have to keep the kitchen cleaned up, but teaching a solid, default go-to-place is very livable. I mean *solid*. Zoë has been so reinforced for being on that bed that it acts like a magnet. You can put a bowl of dog food down on the floor and leave the room and she won't touch it until you get back and release her from her bed. Whenever I'm at the*

*counter, or sitting at the table eating a meal, or preparing her dinner, or even opening the fridge... 95% of the time she's on that bed, because we've taught her that being on her bed is a guaranteed way to get paid--maybe not as exciting as a jack-pot at Las Vegas--but I have to say that 95% of the time she *isn't* counter surfing is very very livable."*

--Sarah Owings
Bridges Dog Training, Los Angeles
www.bridgesdogtraining.com

So the go to bed training DOES work and maybe now you have a bit more insight into WHY your dog feels the need to check a counter he knows is likely to be empty!

5. Changing the dog's behavior when he first gets in the kitchen might be what it takes. Dani Weinberg, Ph.D. of Dogs & Their People in Albuquerque, NM put her powers of observation to work and found that her dog would enter the kitchen and immediately raise her nose toward the counter.

Of course she could have waited till the dog jumped up and then told her "off" but that doesn't remove the rewarding feeling of knowing what's on that counter! So she decided to change where her dog's nose pointed, by adding a small toy basket to the floor in her kitchen.

This keeps the dog's focus to toward the floor.



When Coyote was a pup, he decided his toy box made a good bed!

She says "I had never used a toy basket with a dog before because I thought any right-minded dog would just take all the toys out immediately and strew them all over the house. And that's what Lovey did - on the first day. But never again."

Dani rotates the toys in the basket so that there are always "new" ones. Her dog now makes sure she checks the toy basket often, to see if maybe a *new* toy has appeared. And anyone who HAS a toy box for their dog knows it is great fun to watch them carefully deliberate about which toy they want and then work to get only that one out of the box. And of course it's

usually the toy on the bottom that takes the most work to get!

Dani also says "The basket is still there, and Lovey (now 22 months) has not counter surfed since we started this. Even if no one is in the kitchen, she gets reinforced for focusing downward instead of upward towards the counters."

So give these methods a try! Who knows, you just might find a peaceful solution.