

Counter Surfing



Counter surfing can be one of the most difficult things to train a dog not to do. Almost every time a dog jumps, she is reinforced by what she finds up there. It doesn't matter if you yell at the dog, physically punish her, give her a time out, or any thing else – she still got the Thanksgiving turkey and man oh man, it was good while it lasted!

Management is the key to stopping counter surfing. If you don't have anything on the counter for the dog to get, then there is no reason to jump. This type of management is very difficult for most people to deal with, since counters are traditionally designed with food preparation and storage in mind. On the bright side, if you're interested in starting a collection of something, you could collect thick crockery jars with locking lids and/or metal canisters with tight lids and store food in those. ☺

If you do not want to start collecting kitchenware, there are some things that you can do. You can restrict the dog's access to the kitchen. This can be done with baby gates, convenient doors, or by simply never letting the dog into the kitchen. Keep in mind that if you train the dog to stay out without barriers, even the best trained dog can be lead astray. No one, not even our dogs, is perfect.

You can also work to set the dog up. Sprinkle enticing food with hot sauce, cayenne pepper, bitter apple spray, lemon juice, etc. Provided your dog doesn't love strange things (I have yet to find a food my dog Beamish won't eat!) and doesn't thoroughly inspect food before eating, you have a chance at teaching your dog that counter surfing tastes nasty.

Another trap that you could set involves more enticing food, a cookie sheet, a thin rope, several pennies and soda cans, and a good place for the human to hide. Put the food on the cookie sheet – the smellier the food the better. Put the cookie sheet far enough back on the counter so that the dog can't easily see it. Surround the food with soda cans that have pennies placed inside. Attach the string to the tray in such a way that you are able to hide while still holding the string. Wait for the dog to come in and find the food. As soon as she commits to being bad, pull the string. Come running from your hiding place loudly exclaiming things like "What happened?!?!!" "What was that noise?!?!!" "This is terrible!!!!" Over

exaggerate – this is the WORST thing that has ever happened in the history of humankind. The trick is both for the dog not to see that you made everything come crashing down (you want her to think that this can happen any time, even if she is alone) and that you think it is terrible. You're not yelling at the dog, you are just very upset about the situation.

There are several commercial products that you can use to deter your dog from getting on the counter. You can find these products at many pet stores and on line shops. JB Wholesale Pet Supply happens to sell all of the products I am about to mention on their web site. I mention them only for convenience – all of these products can be found elsewhere as well.



The first product to consider is the Scat Mat. You place the mat on the surface you want your pet to avoid. If the dog touches the mat, she will receive a mild shock, not unlike static electricity. (I take a long time to learn things and I zapped myself numerous times on our Scat Mat. It doesn't hurt, but I really do not want to touch it again, either.)

You can also look into the Snappy Trainer, which is a mousetrap that has plastic paddles attached to prevent the dog from getting seriously hurt. However, if the dog jumps up on a surface that has a Snappy Trainer set; it will make a loud snap and possibly give the dog a light slap.

The X-Mat is an inexpensive plastic mat with raised plastic nubs on it. Like the Scat Mat, the X-Mat is placed on the counter and the dog touches it when she jumps up. Unlike the Scat Mat, no shock is given; the aversion is that the bumps don't feel very nice.

A more expensive option, which can be very effective, is a remote citronella collar. You set up the dog much as you would in the scenario with the soda cans and cookie sheet. Place food out for the dog to find while you hide. You will need to be hiding nearby since most remote citronella collars do not have a far range. As soon as the dog commits to committing the crime, spray her with citronella. The solution will not hurt her, but the sight and sound of the spray is startling, the smell and taste of the spray is unpleasant, and the dog feels a sudden cool spray on her face. One way or another, the dog will sense the correction.

Ultimately, no correction or deterrent works as well as preventing the situation from beginning the first place. Remember that the reason we were able to domesticate dogs as easily as we did is probably because canines were willing to sneak into camp and steal food that was unattended. This happened enough times and soon canines just started hanging around camp as a good place to find food. Dogs in general and Labradors in particular, are scavengers. It is hard to deprogram thousands of years of evolution.