

Fido FUNdamentals LLC

Counter Surfing

Counter surfing is one of the more difficult things to stop. It is much better to prevent it! If your dog EVER gets rewarded for jumping on tables and counters, he will keep trying. Dogs are gamblers. Remember important learning theory states that “behaviors that are positively reinforced will be repeated”.

Researchers now believe that during the evolution of wolves, some of the less timid wolves learned they could find food by coming closer to humans’ places of living (camping). They would raid garbage cans or campsites and even come into human’s space to get tasty food. The wolves that figured out they could get food this easily became more tame. Their offspring were even tamer. The domesticated dog arose from this process. Dogs still have foraging for food in their genes. They get enjoyment out of hunting and finding food. This also mentally tires them out and provides physical exercise. It is actually much more satisfying than inhaling food from a bowl.

You can use this to your advantage by placing food dispensing toys (Filled Kong, Premier food dispensing toys, Buster Cube, Tricky Treat Ball) strategically around the house. You can also place quality chews around (Antlerz are especially durable). Teach your dog to “hunt” for his food. Start out placing these food filled toys someplace easy to find. Walk around near the toy and say “find your toy”. When he finds one, praise him and let him enjoy it. Gradually make it more difficult. Hint: you may have to make the “stuffed” toy empty out easily at first, but gradually make that more difficult. This game gives your dog mental stimulation and uses his food to occupy him so he isn’t jumping on counters looking for stuff or chewing up your best shoes. Putting your dog’s food in a bowl limits your ability to use food to modify behavior and does nothing to mentally stimulate him.

Management is a MUST if you want to stop all counter surfing. All counters must always be free of rewards (food, toys, things YOUR dog wants). If you want to store food on the counter, place it in a tamper proof container and well back from the edge. You must keep the dog from even occasionally getting rewarded. Barricades such as baby gates work well or confining the dog when you can’t watch every move. Remember, dogs are gamblers. They will keep trying if they get random rewards.

Note: You can teach your dog to leave food alone unless given permission to take it. Step on your dog’s leash (the leash is just to keep him from wandering away), lower your open hand with a treat in it in front of your dog. When he tries to get the treat, close your hand, but keep it there. When he quits trying to get the treat, say “yes”, open your hand, give him permission such as “get it”, and give the treat. You must NOT let him grab the treat out of your hand until you have said the magic words (“get it”). Practice this in many places and also place the food on the floor and cover it if he tries to go for it. Give him a different, yummiier treat when he leaves the one on the floor and pick that one up yourself. Make sure your reward for *leave it* is very high value.

Set-ups:

When your dog is readily leaving food alone from your open hand or when you drop it on the floor, put some tasty food on the counter when your dog isn’t watching. Then walk into the room with your dog (dragging a leash) and stay close. At the instant he starts to jump on the counter to get the treat, clap your hands while you stop him by stepping on his leash. Wait for him to orient to you; then praise. Repeat until he can walk near the counter and NOT try to get the treat. Then say “yes” and give him the treat from the counter! Practice this at random intervals with various food items to help your dog generalize that all food on counters is off-limits. Continue to keep your counters free of food to eliminate opportunities for your dog to steal and get reinforced.

Tip: You may want to teach your dog to lie down in an adjacent room while you are preparing food. Tethering can help him learn to lie down patiently (along with giving him an occasional treat for staying out of the kitchen!). Start with giving treats frequently and gradually increase the time between treats while he lies quietly in his place.

