



Paw Prints

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Columnist

Coping with counter surfing

You turn your back for a few seconds, leaving four pieces of chicken sitting on a platter on top of the kitchen counter. Moments later, one piece of chicken has vanished, and your dog is close by licking his chops.

Has this scenario happened in your house?

Counter surfing is when your dog jumps up onto the kitchen counter and takes food. Smaller, more agile dogs may jump up with all four paws on the counter, while other dogs just prop their front paws on the counter-tops to reach any food left out. And still-smaller dogs will surf the dining table by jumping up on a chair first.

Dogs counter surf

because they have learned that kitchen counters are an easy source of yummy snacks.

Counter surfing is a very common dog behavior problem, and for some pet parents it can be very difficult to deal with. Counter surfing, just like chasing squirrels, is a type of dog behavior that can be seen as a problem, but in reality is a perfectly natural and normal behavior for a dog.

When a dog's behavior is rewarded, he's more likely to repeat that behavior in the future. So when Rover finds food on the counter when he jumps up, it's his reward. This is food we are talking about. Food is the number-one reward for many dogs.

Dogs are optimists and opportunists, so even if your pooch has only found food on the counter once or twice, he will keep on jumping up to look for it, whether it's the counter or the kitchen table.

There are several ways to deal with this dog behavior issue. If you are a first-time pet parent, you may realize that you will need to change some of your habits — not leaving food around, removing dirty dishes, etc.

The simplest solution, of course, is to manage the situation so that your furry friend doesn't have access

to food on the counters or tables. Here are some tips:

- Never keep food on your counters. If your dog doesn't find any food when he jumps up, he's not getting rewarded for counter surfing.

- Dogs have incredible sniffers, so wipe the counter-tops and tables thoroughly when you are done cooking so that there's no residue for Rover to lick up. Even finding something tasty to lick can be rewarding.

- Try crating your dog during meal preparation. Or if he isn't trained to crate, use a baby gate in the doorway to restrict access to the kitchen.

What about teaching Rover not to counter surf? Here is an example of a behavior you can teach your dog to discourage counter surfing:

"Leave it" is a useful cue for many situations, including counter surfing. To start training Rover to leave it, go somewhere quiet and less exciting for your dog than the kitchen.

Start with an extra-special tasty treat in both hands; place your hands behind your back. Then make a fist with one hand and offer that hand to your dog, letting him sniff your fist. Say "leave it" and wait until he is done sniffing. As soon as he's



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Mia has learned to stop table surfing when no food is around.

done sniffing, say "yes," or click with a clicker, and offer him the treat from the other hand.

Keep doing this until Rover immediately stops sniffing your hand when you say, "leave it." When this happens consistently, you are ready to move on to the next step.

Next, leash your dog and then toss a treat outside his reach. Say "leave it" and wait until he stops sniffing and pulling toward the treat. When he stops sniffing and pulling, say "yes" or click, and give him a treat that he likes more than the

one on the floor. Over time, by practicing this exercise, Rover should stop pulling as soon as you give the "leave it" cue.

When trying to dissuade a counter surfer, you need to help him learn that leaving the human food alone is more rewarding than counter surfing.

Of course this strategy will only work when you are there to give a cue. When you're not going to be around, remember to remove temptation either by blocking off access to the kitchen or by keeping the counters and tables clear of food.

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