

COUNTER SURFING

What is “counter surfing” and how do we prevent it?

Counter surfing is a term used to describe dogs taking food or other items off counters or tables. Dogs are scavengers by nature, so counter surfing is a natural behaviour for them and is a common problem for many dog guardians. It can also become a dangerous behaviour if our dogs remove something potentially harmful like an item that is toxic to pets or something that may cause an intestinal blockage if ingested.



What is management?

Management is how we set up the environment to decrease the likelihood that an animal is able to practice an undesirable behaviour. If an animal is reinforced when displaying a particular behaviour, that behaviour will reoccur. Management can also be employed for the welfare of our pets and our own well being and may help to decrease fear, anxiety and stress in our pets. Management is crucial in the prevention of counter surfing.

How do we manage counter surfing?

First, ensure that that your pet cannot reach countertop items by putting items away or placing everything back from the edge as far as possible. Also, remove items from tables or other areas that your pet may be able to access.

Remember: pets being able to remove an item from the counter will reinforce the counter surfing behaviour. So, it is imperative that we minimize the temptation as much as possible.

Preventing access to the area of concern is another way we can manage this behaviour. To do this, we can use x-pens or baby gates as barriers (unless actively working on a training session with your pet) to prevent your pet from entering the area of concern.



How do we train our pets to stop counter surfing?

Counter surfing is a self-reinforcing behaviour; when our pets jump onto the counter or table and take an item, the action is immediately reinforced and this new ability is highly motivating. If we use positive punishment (yelling, physical reprimands, spraying our pets with water etc.), it can diminish our bond with our pets. It can also cause conflicting emotions if punishment is implemented when the guardian is present but the same behaviour is reinforced when unsupervised. While preventing or managing counter-surfing it is important to reinforce a preferred behaviour. One of the most beneficial behaviours guardians can teach their pets is to station on a mat and to maintain all four paws on the floor rather than jumping up.

HOW DO WE TEACH A PET TO STATION ON A MAT?

What do we need for a session?

- Small, yummy treats for training
- A mat with a sticky (non-slip) back, like a yoga mat or a bath mat
- A quiet, low distraction environment
- A marker



A marker can be a specific sound (such as a click) or a verbal word (such as “yes”). Think of the marker as a camera: when you see the desirable behaviour, mark it (take a “picture”) using a “click” or verbal marker “yes” and then reward your dog.

Over time, your dog learns that the marker signals success and a reward is on the way. This creates a clear communication system between you and your dog, making training more effective and enjoyable for both of you.

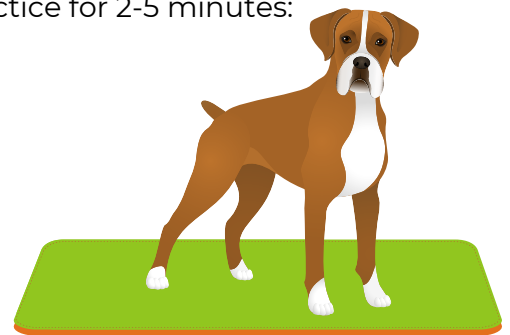
FIRST SESSION

1. Place the mat on the floor in a low distraction environment where the undesirable behaviour does not occur.
2. Toss treats onto the mat. Over time this can help your dog make a positive association with the mat. Begin by tossing treats every 1-2 seconds for 10 repetitions.
3. Toss a treat away from the mat and, while your dog is eating the treat, put the mat away until the next session.

SECOND SESSION:

1. Repeat the first two steps of the first session.
2. Toss a treat away so your pet leaves the mat.
During this session, because treats have been tossed on the mat previously, the dog is likely to come back to the mat and place all four paws onto the mat. Over time, the end goal is that the dog returns to the mat and sits or lays down.
3. Shape the behaviour (each step earns a mark and treat) and practice for 2-5 minutes:

- Dog comes back toward the mat
- Dog sniffs or looks at the mat
- Dog puts a paw onto the mat
- Dog puts two paws onto the mat
- Dog puts all paws onto the mat
- Dog puts all paws onto the mat and sits
- Dog puts all paws onto the mat and lays down



It is important to give breaks and occasionally toss treats off the mat to “reset” the dog and determine if they want to come back. If they do, mark and treat when they return to the mat. These steps may not be linear, but you can increase and decrease criteria as you need to ensure you move at your dog's pace.

4. After 2-5 minutes, toss a treat off the mat so your dog moves away from it.
5. Remove the mat and put it away. Over time, your pet will become more comfortable with returning to the mat for their reinforcement and eventually learn that being on the mat = treats.

Once your pet consistently goes to the mat in a low distraction environment, adjust the mat so it is closer to the area where the problem behaviour occurs.

For example, place the mat beside you in the kitchen and, while you are cooking/prepping etc., toss treats onto the mat for your pet. You can also do this while you are sitting at the table and eating. This is called capturing: catching a desirable behaviour as it occurs. In this case, mark and treat your dog for putting all four paws on the mat, whether they are standing, sitting or laying down. Over time, you can capture the dog sitting or laying down on the mat rather than simply standing on it. Rate of reinforcement should remain high: once every 3-5 seconds to start and slowly increasing duration from there. A verbal cue is not necessary for this behaviour as the context and mat will become the cue.

How do we teach our pet to keep four feet on the floor?

While your pet is in the area of concern, toss treats onto the ground to keep their paws on the floor and prevent jumping. You can also capture four feet on the floor: when they walk towards the counter, mark with a “yes” and treat on the ground before they have the opportunity to jump up.



Counter surfing is a very common behaviour that many dogs perform because of the self-reinforcement it provides. Although scavenging and foraging for food is a normal behaviour in dogs, it can quickly become a health concern if the pet ingests something potentially toxic or dangerous. Managing the environment is crucial in the prevention of counter surfing. In addition to managing the environment, teaching and reinforcing an alternative appropriate behaviour (such as a station on a mat or four feet on the floor) can decrease the likelihood of counter surfing as the pet learns that these alternate behaviours result in reinforcement.

If you find your dog counter surfing outside of a training session despite management being in place, do not yell or reprimand your dog. Instead, call your dog over to you and reinforce them coming to you.