



Why dogs steal food.

Dogs are natural scavengers and opportunistic feeders, so counter surfing and trash can diving are basically hard-wired behaviors. Smelling those juicy morsels just out of reach and figuring out how to get them becomes a delightful game that needs barely any reinforcement to develop into full-scale obsession.

Prevention: First, last, and in-between.

The best protection against counter surfing is to prevent the habit from forming in the first place. If the behavior pays off once, it is very hard to change—because of the double whammy reward of food and a challenge—so don't let your new puppy or dog develop a taste for it. Follow these rules from day one:

First, make sure your dog isn't actually being fed too little.

Second, make sure your dog gets enough exercise and mental stimulation. Many dogs become counter surfers out of sheer boredom.

Third, scavenger-proof your kitchen:

- Always put leftover foods away (this is good food safety advice, too).
- Keep countertop foods in Tupperware containers.
- Keep bread products in bins or jars.
- Put fruits and vegetables in the refrigerator or well out of reach.
- Consider child-proof latches on cupboard doors.
- Use a trash can with a lid or place the can in a cupboard (with a latch).

Proactive control is best. If your dog is looking up toward the counter, simply redirect with his name to a toy or out of the room.

If the damage is done.

If your dog has once managed to gulp down a loaf of bread while you fetched the mail, chances are you have a chronic counter surfer on your hands. What's the answer? Manage, manage, manage. In addition to the above advice, consider installing doors in your kitchen and pantry or using a baby gate to restrict your dog's access anytime you are not around to supervise.

What about deterrents?

There are many products on the market that claim to cure counter surfing. Frankly, most deterrents are ineffective. Hard-core counter surfers are typically highly food-motivated, crafty dogs that are not easily put off. The more you try, the craftier they get.

What not to do.

Don't scold your dog unless you catch him in the act of stealing food. Dogs don't understand delayed consequences, so your dog would not know why he is being lectured.