



Counter Surfing and Trash Raiding

Dogs are opportunistic. Stealing a tasty morsel from the counter or chewing a food-laden wrapper from the trash are very rewarding for dogs. Free, yummy smelling people food is hard to resist. Preventing this type of behavior is key. Once your dog learns that they can reward themselves from the counter or trash, they are highly likely to continue the behavior. Both behaviors are annoying and frustrating for humans, and they can be potentially deadly for your dog, if they steal something that is toxic to them.

Start with prevention and management. For counter surfing, if your dog never rewards themselves from the counter, they are less likely to scavenge there. If your dog has already started this behavior, preventing them from practicing will help change the habit. There are many ways you can manage the environment. Environmental management could include the uses of baby gates to prevent access to the kitchen, crates to keep your dog out of the area when you are cooking, making sure to not leave food available on the counter and cleaning counters thoroughly so there are not crumbs or interesting smells for your dog to investigate. Likewise, preventing access to the trash makes rummaging through the garbage unlikely. Consider placing the trash bin under a counter or in a pantry or using a bin with a firmly closing lid.

Consider teaching an alternate behavior. Place, Off, Wait and Out are all good alternatives. To teach Out, place a treat near your dog's nose. Once they are interested in it, use it to lure your dog out of the kitchen. Mark and reward when the dog is at the threshold but not in the kitchen. Repeat as often as necessary. Alternately, you can toss a treat out of the room so that your dog moves away from counters and trash cans. When you notice your dog at the threshold, you can jackpot them for staying Out of the kitchen. When you know that your dog will consistently move out of the kitchen start saying "Out" and pause before luring them out. Once the dog is proficient at going out of the kitchen, you may want to give them enriching things to do, like a stuffed Kong or a food puzzle. The idea is to make remaining outside of the kitchen more rewarding than sniffing around in the kitchen. The Intermediate class teaches the Place cue, which is extremely useful for preventing kitchen incursions. Place is basically asking your dog to remain in a certain area, like on a dog bed, until you tell them they can be released from that spot.

If your dog does steal something from the counter or out of the trash, there is no point in punishing them if you did not catch them in the act. Counter surfing and trash raiding are predominantly crimes of opportunity. If there is no opportunity, the dog cannot get into trouble. Punishing after the fact only serves to decrease your dog's trust in you and may teach them to only practice the behavior when you can't see them. For these types of self-reinforcing behaviors, an ounce of prevention is really worth a pound of cure.