

WHAT

When a dog jumps up to snatch food or other items from a table or counter, he is counter surfing.

WHY

While dogs did evolve from wolves and are considered predators, they are not accustomed to scavenging for food as pets in our homes. Dogs are excellent scavengers with an amazing sense of smell. And people tend to leave food out on surfaces such as counters and tables, so it does not take dogs long to realize that there are great resources being left out on surfaces above their heads. Being athletic and resourceful creatures, dogs can become quite good at stealing food from these areas. And, this is very rewarding behavior for a dog when he gets to eat goodies. But a lot of unwanted behavior can be traced to scavenging, such as stealing items from trash cans or out of your child's toy box.

MANAGEMENT

Management is very important when trying to curtail a behavior that is so rewarding to a dog. It is important that a dog not be able to practice counter surfing or find rewards for such activity. You will want to use barriers such as pet gates to close off parts of the house where your dog may practice this unwanted behavior. Always keep counters and tables clear of food items.

TRAINING

When you are present, if you notice your dog starting to jump up on counters or tables, tell him no and clap your hands (not angrily—just clearly and to get his attention). When your dog is back on the ground, give him a reward. If your dog is especially persistent about bothering you while you are cooking or eating, try training him to hang out on a mat. Find something to use as a mat and put several treats on it. Then, anytime your dog is on the mat, say, “yes” and then add more treats to the mat. When your dog gets off the mat, do not provide more treats. This can be a fun game to train with your dog's meals. When he is on the mat, he gets some kibble; if he gets off the mat, the meal ends. It usually does not take long to have a dog who happily hangs out on his mat when you are eating or cooking. He will eagerly await a treat of his own!

ACTIVITIES

It is important to make sure that your dog is getting plenty of stimulation, both physical and mental. A lot of unwanted behavior in dogs happens because they become bored. Turn mealtimes into scavenging games for your dog. Give him outlets for his natural desire to search for food. Scatter kibble on the floor around your house—under and around objects—so your dog must use his nose to find it. Play similar games outdoors. Stuff your dog's meals into hollow chews such as Kongs and marrow bones and rotate those with feeding in puzzle toys. Sometimes, hide the chews and puzzles and let your dog search for them. There are lots of enrichment ideas available online, and you can even make your own puzzle toys!