



RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Food Stealing aka Counter Surfing

Have you ever asked yourself the question - “where did my sandwich go?”, or pondered “I’m sure I left the chicken right here on the bench”. Chances are you have a thief in your family and it’s not your children. It may be your dog or even your cat! Dogs are opportunists and will take advantage of situations unless taught otherwise. Cats are very agile and are able to jump up on kitchen benches easily. If your pet has been rewarded for this by getting a tasty morsel (or a packet of bacon!) off a table or kitchen bench, then some work is required to “pet proof” your kitchen or dinner table, and the work starts with you! Food stealing off the benches is unfortunately your fault, not your pets.

Make it non-reinforcing

If you have left even a crumb of food on the bench, it can be reinforcing for your dog or cat. For starters, make sure you put all food away in the fridge or out of reach of your pets when you are not there. Even if you have to turn your back for a few seconds, or leave the room to answer the phone, put the food away!

Catching them in the act

If you punish your dog or cat for counter surfing, then your pet will just do it when you aren’t looking! Not to mention the stress on your animal for using punishment. Why take it out on your pet if you have left the food in reach! Refer to our info sheet - Why we don’t use punishment.

If you do come across your dog or cat trying to get food off the bench (and hopefully you have prevented this!), calmly redirect/lure their attention away from the bench. The lure needs to be of higher value than what is on the bench. You can also use toys and play as a reward.

For dogs - lure them away, ask them to sit on their bed and reward with a treat. If they are rewarded for all four paws on the ground often, they will be more likely and more willing to repeat this behaviour.

For cats - calmly lure them off the bench and reward for all four paws on the floor. If your cat will not follow a lure, if it is safe to do so and they are used to being handled, calmly lift them off the bench and reward when on the ground with a play or treat.

Small dogs and young cats should be gently lifted off the bench for safety reasons and rewarded on the ground.

Other management tips

If your dog or cat is jumping up at the dinner table or outdoor table when you are eating, here are some ideas;

Prevent access to the area - make sure they have something else to keep them occupied with such as a bone or chew (Refer to our Entertaining your dog info sheet).





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Teach an alternate behaviour - for example, train your dog to go and sit on your mat or bed with a chew (Refer to our Mat training info sheet). A tether may help here too.

Crate train your pets! Train your pets to go to their crates during meal times. To help you set your dog or cat up for success with a crate, refer to our Crating for Management info sheet.

Don't forget, if you are continuously pushing your dog down or getting angry with them, this is still attention for your pet which is what they are after!

Remember to reward your pet when they do the right thing, then it is more likely to be repeated. Don't forget, once a counter surfer, always a counter surfer - so don't get complacent!

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