

By Your Side Pet Behavior Consulting & Training

Teaching your cat to stay off kitchen counters

Cats are naturally curious creatures; they like to explore. They are also both hunter and prey.

Now, think about a kitchen counter. It is a high place where a hunter can survey the area below. It smells like food, so there might be some yummy morsels up there. It is potentially out of reach for creatures that might hunt the hunter. AND...You spend a lot of time at your counter doing interesting things and creating good smells. Of course, the cat is curious about what is going on up there!

As in other situations (like scratching and sleep) human living preferences and cats' natural behaviors are not entirely aligned. That doesn't mean you can't find common ground with your feline family member.

You *can* teach your cat to stay off kitchen counters! It is best to do start the moment she joins your household.

WHAT NOT TO DO:

- **Yell, scold or push your cat off the counter** – You never want to punish normal feline behavior.
- **Spray your cat with water or anything else** – Most cats do not like to be sprayed with water. You run the risk of your cat associating your presence with this negative experience instead of the action of jumping on the counter.
- **Put something on the counter that might harm your cat** (e.g. “sticky tape” or mouse traps)
- **Leave things on the counters that are attractive to your cats** (i.e., food, toys) – You do not want to inadvertently reinforce the counter jumping behavior by leaving a “reward” in the form of food or toys.

WHAT TO DO:

- **Provide elevated surfaces elsewhere** (including, if possible, in the kitchen) that are appropriate for the cat. Cats like to perch, and some feel safer on higher surfaces. Make sure the cat has access to a cat tree, shelves, and window perches (or even just the sill).
- **Reward them for being on the ground** - All the good stuff happens on the ground! If you see your cat look up at the counter as if she is going to jump, drop a treat on the floor next to her and praise her for not jumping, then toss a toy (if she is playful) or roll a treat away (if she is food motivated).
- **Mat train** your cat so that you can send her to her mat when you are busy in the kitchen. [I like this video](#) on how to mat train your cat. If you don't have a clicker (as in the video), you can use a “verbal marker” instead. For example, say the word “yes” instead of clicking.
- **If you need to remove your cat from the counter, do so gently.** Pick her up, put her in an acceptable place (on the ground or on one of those perches), praise her, and pet her or give her a treat.
- **Try citrus-smelling cleaners** to clean your counters. Cats typically do not like the smell of citrus and may avoid the counters if they smell like it.
- **Be consistent** – You will need to be patient and consistent as you *train* your cat not to jump on the counters. Yes! Treat this as a training exercise. To recap:
 - Reinforce your cat on the ground and work on mat training in and around the kitchen
 - Immediately remove your cat (gently) from the counters *every time* she jumps up – do not let her “get away with it” when you are tired.
 - Better yet, catch her looking up, before she jumps and redirect her attention to the floor for a yummy treat, play time, or even just some scratches behind the ear.