

HOW TO KEEP YOUR CAT OFF TABLES AND COUNTERS

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COUNTERS AND YOUR CAT

Why do cats find counters so appealing? Take this quiz to find out:

- A. Because they're there.
- B. Because cats naturally prefer a three-dimensional environment.
- C. Because cats occasionally find food morsels while patrolling countertops.
- D. All of the above.

Answer D is correct.

THE DOWNSIDE

There are many good reasons why your cat should stay off the counter. Cats spend a fair amount of time each day in their litter box, scratching around and covering up their waste. Although they frequently "wash" their paws with their tongues, it is likely that some traces of urine and feces will remain on their paws to be deposited on your countertops in molecular concentrations. Not a great thought if you are about to prepare food.

Also, while they are up on counters, cats may pause to lick the butter or steal nibbles or whole chunks of food that you have left lying around. It can be pretty annoying to find that your cooling bacon strips have been dragged to the floor as cat fodder. In addition, not everything the cat steals will be good for him – and some things, like chicken bones, can be downright harmful.

COUNTERPOINT

Some may argue that healthy cat urine and feces has never poisoned anyone. Urine, as you may know, is normally sterile. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi used to drink a pint of his own urine each morning to start the day. When a cat has urinary tract disease or intestinal parasites (especially *Toxoplasma gondii*), however, this safety factor is lost. UTIs are easy to spot and the presence of intestinal parasites can be determined by laboratory tests. Both are usually easy to treat. Just ask your vet.

As far as disappearing food is concerned, cats don't eat much and, with the correct dental care, their mouths should be fairly healthy places anyway.

HOW TO GET 'EM OFF

Here are several things you can do to keep kitty where he belongs:

- Make sure that your cat has other places to climb so that the countertop is not his only vertical challenge. Climbing frames positioned by a window, providing a perch with a view, may divert some attention from the counters.
- Make sure that your counters never have food items lying around on them. Always clean up properly by putting unused food away. A cat that finds morsels of food once in a while will keep looking for more for many moons.
- Make counters unattractive. Cats, generally, do not like the smell of citrus or disinfectants. Try using a countertop cleaner with a citrus odor after use.
- Train your cat - preferably using "click and treat" methodology. Train your cat to jump down to the cue word "off." First train the cat to touch a wand (touch-click-food reward) that later serves as a target. When the wand is positioned over the counter, the cat will have to jump up on the counter to touch the wand and get the click and treat. (You can't teach a cat to jump off unless she is up in the first place!). The wand is then lowered to floor level. The cat jumps down to touch it (click-treat). Finally the word "off" is interjected as the wand is lowered to the floor. Of course, you do not always need to use the wand once the behavior (jumping down) has been put "on cue." But rewards are necessary from time to time if the cat is to stay trained.
- Booby traps/mild punishers. Various booby traps have been invented to deter cats from counter surfing. Some of these deterrents include: putting cling film over the countertop, making a shallow tray out of aluminum foil and filling it with water, various springing devices (upside-down mousetraps or proprietary plastic jumping frogs), or attaching a black thread "trip wire" across the access to the counter and attaching it to a nearby pile of shake cans.
- More severe punishers. Sounding an air horn (boat horn/fog horn) at exactly the moment the cat's feet touch the countertop. You should hide when doing this. The idea is that the cat thinks that the counter made the noise, not you. Some people have resorted to electric shock pads that give the cat a mild shock when he jumps on the counter though these can cause considerable distress to some cats. The only alternative is to teach yourself not to worry so much about your cat being up on the counters. This is the cognitive approach to therapy – for you.

My cats free range across my countertops while I'm watching them because they know I don't care. I could yell at them and chase them off, as many people do, but why bother? All you teach your cat by this approach is that you are unpredictable, mentally unstable, and should be watched carefully for signs of sudden behavioral meltdowns. Then, when you're not around, your cat will cruise and patrol the counters as if nothing had changed. The only thing punishment teaches an animal is how to avoid the punisher ... you. With the remote punishers, the situation's a little more acceptable in the sense that it's the counter that they avoid.