

Cats and High Places: Keeping Them off Counters and Tables

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Last week, I had an inquiry from a recent shelter cat adopter. This new adopter wanted to know how she could keep her new cat, Chowder, off countertops and the table. It seems whenever they prepare food or eat, Chowder is right there waiting for his fair share.

Since this behavior started, they have tried several methods to deter him from jumping up, including yelling at him, placing him back on the floor, and recently started using a squirt bottle to keep him off. None of their techniques are working and they are quickly becoming frustrated.

Why do cats often find counters and tables so appealing?

- Cats instinctively like high places. Cats make use of vertical spaces, much like their ancestors used rocks, bushes, and trees.
- There is food on counters and tables (even small traces that we might not detect) and they take the gamble that they can find this food.
- Access to water can be a strong motivator for this behavior as well.
- They are getting away from something in the house (kids, dogs, other cats, vacuums, etc.).
- There is something outside to watch or see where the counter gives the best vantage point out the window.
- Cats often learn quickly that jumping on the counter or table is a surefire way to get your attention even if that is not your original intent.



What does not help?

Using water bottles to spray your cat, yelling “no”, and placing them back on the floor will probably not change this behavior. In some cases, it might make the behavior more persistent. Some cats may become anxious, because from their perspective, your behavior is suddenly unpredictable and alarming. Often, the only thing these cats are learning from these strategies is to stay away from the “punisher”, who in this case is you!

What can be done to reduce this behavior?

Step 1: Determine why your cat is getting on the counter in the first place.

Are they trying to get away from something in the home? Another cat? The dogs? A person? Are they window watching for birds, other cats, or just outside activity in general? Are they sunbathing? Only sitting on the counter when the sun is there? Are they searching for delicious tidbits of food? Do they like to drink or play with the water in the sink? Are there interesting “toys” left on the counter such as forks, spoons, lids, paper, hair ties, pencils, sponges, etc.?

Once the “why” is determined, prevention and management can be put into place.

Step 2: Avoid Reinforcing or encouraging the behavior.

Make sure food is never left on the counter or table at any time, not even a morsel. Any little crumb will reinforce the behavior making the behavior harder to change. It is also important that you do not leave water in the sink or the water running so your cat is not encouraged to investigate the sink.

Keeping your counters clean and tidy can be very difficult, especially if you live in a very small place or you have other family members that might not be as tidy as you would like. However, making sure the other “toys” are unavailable will prevent your cat from looking in these spaces for things to play with.

You can also make the counters less appealing for your cat. Closing the curtains or blinds in the kitchen window will remove the lure of the sun for those sunbathers, encouraging them to seek the other locations. In general, cats are not a fan of citrus and various other strong-smelling disinfectants. Cleaning your countertop and table with a citrus cleaner can reduce the appeal for some cats. Make sure the counter is dry immediately after wiping so there are no opportunities for your cat to ingest these cleaners or get them on their feet or fur. Placing a carpet runner upside down on your countertop or table creates an unpleasant texture that cats will try to avoid.

Step 3: Provide alternative places for your cat to use.

If your cat is trying to get away from something in the house, provide other safe places for your cat. Cat trees, shelving, chairs, or even another table nearby with a box and cat bed in it can create a safe place for your cat to retreat. If your cat is a window watcher or sunbather creating a perch in another window is a simple solution.

Cats that are trying to escape to higher ground might need help learning that the cat tree, boxes, or shelving is safe. Be sure to place treats in the new location so your cat explores the alternative places on their own. In addition, when the thing they are trying to avoid is approaching them call them to the new location, and give them treats.

Placing a bird feeder outside the window where the perch or cat tree is located is a sure way to keep your cat entertained. Using perches in several windows will allow the sunbathers to move from window to window.

If your cat likes to get on the counters when you are preparing food and eating, give them something else to do like a food dispensing or puzzle toy. The website Food Puzzles for Cats is an excellent resource to find the perfect toys for your cat.

Place treats in the locations you want your cat to go, such as the other window perches, on the cat tree, in the box on the chair, so they are rewarded for searching the new spots but there are no rewards for your cat on the kitchen counter or table.

Make sure your cat has a variety of toys similar to the ones that attract them to the countertops to play. Scatter the toys on the floor near the counters or tables. If you consistently keep the counter and table clean and provide toys on the floor, your cat will learn that the counters are no longer worth investigating because all of the fun stuff is on the floor. If your cat is drawn to running water to drink or play in, consider using a cat water fountain.

Step 4: Train your cat.

Yes, cats can be trained. Use positive reinforcement to teach your cat behaviors such as coming when called, targeting or touch, fetch, and go to a place or mat, which is also called stationing. These simple behaviors not only help to improve the bond you have with your cat but provide clear communication and an opportunity to reward them for the behaviors you want them to do more often.

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