

Keeping Your Cat Off Countertops and Tables

Cats are supreme tree-climbing hunters, with strongly muscled backs and hindquarters that give them tremendous power to jump—either horizontally or vertically. It's normal for cats to jump and climb to high places as they explore their environment. They have sharp, protractile (extendable) claws that serve as useful crampons for climbing.

WHY DO CATS LIKE TO CLIMB?

Cats climb for several reasons. They seek out high vantage points, like countertops and shelves, to survey their territory. They can leap onto bookshelves or scale drapes to escape from another household pet or from something that scares them. Tables and the top of the refrigerator often provide warm, sunny places to snooze. Cats can learn to patrol or “surf” countertops, stovetops and tables in search of tasty tidbits left behind. Although cats are graceful acrobats and rarely break things or pose a danger to themselves, some pet parents prefer that their cats stay off certain countertops and tables.

It's reported that the Ragdoll breed actually dislikes heights and is less inclined to climb, so if you don't yet have a cat and would prefer one that stays on the ground, a Ragdoll could be an excellent choice.

ALTERNATIVES TO CLIMBING ON COUNTERTOPS AND TABLES

It's best not to stifle your cat's normal jumping and climbing behavior. Your cat will be much happier if you can provide her with acceptable outlets for climbing, jumping, escaping, resting and inspecting the environment. If you don't, your cat will likely persist in leaping up onto forbidden surfaces. Indoor cat “tree” furniture with natural bark or carpeting and comfortable platforms is an ideal substitute. Kitty condos (another type of indoor vertical furniture designed for cats), with abundant comfortable perching and sleeping areas, are very appealing to most cats. Offer plenty of comfortable nesting beds in warm areas or with burrowing material for extra warmth. Cats who like to gaze out windows or sleep in the sun appreciate commercially available kitty shelves that attach to window sills, such as the Kitty Sill™ and the LazyPet® Deluxe Window Perch. Some, like the Thermo Kitty Sill™, even come with heaters built into the cushions.

Perpetually hungry cats who explore kitchen countertops for food can be easier to discourage if they get more to eat. Feed several small meals a day or, if your cat isn't overweight, provide free access to food. (If you decide to try free feeding, monitor your cat's weight closely and go back to giving her regular meals if she starts to put on weight.) Be sure to put all desirable human food away so that your cat isn't rewarded with tasty surprises when she hops up on counters.

DISCOURAGING YOUR CAT FROM JUMPING ON COUNTERTOPS AND TABLES

If you provide your cat with alternatives for climbing and, at the same time, arrange the environment so that places like countertops and tables are scary for your cat, you may be able to teach her to avoid those specific areas. You can dissuade your cat from entering banned areas by using “environmental punishers,” which punish her remotely, without you being present. Cats are sensitive animals, so it's never a good idea to shoo a cat away with your hands or threaten her with a spray bottle. Too often, your cat just learns to be afraid of you. Instead, arrange for the environment to punish your cat directly. For instance, if your cat likes to jump from the floor onto the kitchen counter, balance some lightweight cookie sheets on the edge of the counter. When your cat jumps up, she'll land on the sheets. They'll move and possibly topple over, making some unpleasant noise while she leaps back onto the floor. Your cat shouldn't be harmed by this experience, but she'll be unlikely to risk jumping on the counter again.

Commercially available deterrent devices perform a similar function. The Snappy™ Trainer is a large plastic paddle attached to an upside-down mousetrap. Any touch causes the mousetrap to trigger. When triggered, the device flies up in the air and startles the cat who set it off. The device is safe because (a) the trap is upside-down, so your cat can't be caught in it, and (b) the large paddle causes the trap to propel up into the air. The Snappy Trainer is most effective if you set up two or three and place a sheet of newspaper on top of them. When your cat touches the newspaper, she'll trigger the traps simultaneously. The SSSCAT® cat repellent device is a motion-activated system that triggers a blast of compressed air when a cat comes within a certain distance. These devices can be positioned in areas where you don't want your cat to go. Another option is to cover the area with a ScatMat®, a sheet of plastic that delivers a mild static charge when a cat steps on it.

The main advantage to using an environmental punisher is that it happens whether you're present or not. Your cat won't learn to simply wait until it's safe—until you're not around—to do things like jump up on countertops and tables. Instead, she'll discover that it's *never* safe to do those things. Since you won't always be there when your cat gets punished, she won't associate an environmental punisher with you. You don't want her to decide that *you're* the scary thing!

WHAT NOT TO DO

- Do not scold your cat verbally, spank her or hit her for getting on countertops and tables. It's highly unlikely that this kind of punishment will teach her to stay off. More likely, she'll just become frightened of you.
- Do not shoo or push your cat off countertops and tables. She could fall and injure herself.
- Do not use any device to scare your cat away from forbidden areas if there's a chance she could be physically harmed by the device. For instance, do not substitute real mousetraps for the Snappy Trainer. The point of an environmental punisher is to make your cat reluctant to return to a particular place. The intent is to startle her or make the place uncomfortable for her. There is no reason to physically harm your cat.
- Do not use environmental punishers to keep your cat away from a certain area if she's especially skittish and nervous. She may become so frightened that she'll be reluctant to enter the room at all or even move around your home.

Source:

- ASPCA: <http://www.asPCA.org/Pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/cat-articles>