

Question: We started giving our dog food from the table since he was a puppy. No he will sit by the table and beg. Sometimes he whines and other times there is a low growl for food. He will try to take food out of your hands and sometimes gets on the counter to get food. Someone told me he has “hungry dog syndrome”. Is he sick? If not, what can I do to stop the begging?

Answer: Hungry dog syndrome is not a real disease but a term people often use to describe a dog that is very food motivated and may be good at stealing food. If the need for food is something new, you should have your dog examined to rule out underlying malabsorption or maldigestion disorders that are making your dog feel hungry. If your veterinarian determines that your pet is healthy, this behavior can be frustrating for you and your guests.

The problem with begging for food and counter surfing, getting food off counters, is that when these behaviors are successful, they are highly reinforcing for dogs and the behavior is likely to be repeated. One thing that is likely to help many of these dogs is to slow down meal times. This can be achieved by using slow release toys, Kongs, treat balls, Canine Genius and others. Being so highly food motivated, dogs will learn to work very hard for a small amount of food and still have their regular amount. This will keep them occupied for quite some time. It is important to keep as much food off the counter as possible, as each time they “counter surf” and find food, they will be more likely to do this again.

If your pet begs, it is important to try to ignore him. Looking at him, talking to him and giving him attention may seem like a small act, but it can actually reinforce the undesired behavior. It is very hard to ignore a begging pet, but very important. After you are finished eating, find their favorite ball or toy to play with instead of offering food. If ignoring your pet is too hard or they are aggressive and will not stop, you can confine your dog elsewhere during food preparation and eating times.

Extra treats from begging and counter surfing can lead to obesity, a very big health problem. Working with your pet to stop begging and counter surfing behaviors will take some time but in the long run will create a healthier relationship between the two of you and a healthier life for your pet.