

1 Using the wrong cleaning materials to mop up spills and scrub away stains.

Abrasive cleaners may seem like the best way to dislodge that dried spaghetti sauce and glass cleaner may give your counters great shine, but don't pull the trigger on that spray bottle until you're *sure* it's right for your surface. Abrasives and steel wool can mar and scratch laminate countertops, and high alkaline substances like ammonia will ruin stone. "They erode the effective ingredients in sealers," says Drew Brandt, the president of Intrepid Marble & Granite in Portland. "So what you're doing is exposing the pores and making the stone like a sponge, which increases the likelihood of staining."

SOLUTION: Follow your countertop manufacturer's recommendations; they know better than anyone what renders their surface spotless and what does damage! For laminate surfaces, mild soap and a sponge will clean up most spills (a diluted baking soda solution will take care of tougher stains). For stone, however, off-the-shelf cleaners just won't do. Instead, pick up a specialty cleaner at your stone dealer's showroom. "There's a cleaner on the market that's neutral-based and that has a bit of sealer in it," says Brandt, "so every time you wipe down your countertops it adds more sealer to the surface."

2 Running around after your dinner guests, sponge in hand, wiping up every spilt drop of wine and crumb of hors d'oeuvres to keep your new countertops pristine.

You've installed honed granite or concrete countertops as the stunning centerpiece in your newly remodeled kitchen, but every time you have guests over, you end up swooping in to erase water rings as soon as they lift their glasses to make the rounds.

SOLUTION: Either view the inevitable stains as beauty marks and enjoy the patina that your countertops develop through the years *or* be diligent about protecting your surfaces through regular resealing. "What some people see as stains, other people see as character," says Eric Butler, the owner of the Portland-based concrete design company Eric Butler Designs. "We'll come out every couple of years and reseal a concrete countertop if you don't want it to develop that patina." Another

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THE
most
common

Kitchen
Countertop

MISTAKES
and How to Correct Them

option is to buy stone that has a pattern, courtesy of Mother Nature, that will make drips and drops less noticeable.

3 Assuming your countertop can handle hot pots and pans sans trivet or hot pad.

Some surfaces *can* handle hot pots and pans being transferred directly from your cooktop or oven, but many, like laminates, can't—and will burn, bubble or stain as soon as you set down your still steaming cookware. "That's a serious kitchen foul!" says Rob Novak, the manager of Wilsonart products at the Cronin Company in Portland. "Laminates are made under heat pressure and can handle boiling water, but anything hotter than 250 degrees could create a blister and char the surface."

SOLUTION: Bone up on what your countertop can handle and act accordingly. Find out from the manufacturer or dealer exactly how much heat your surface can take—and, if it's got a low temperature threshold, stock up on trivets and potholders.

4 Limiting yourself to one surface material.

When it comes to countertops, material options run the gamut from traditional laminates and stone to contemporary stainless steel and concrete, and each has a unique style and functionality. That said, rare is the homeowner who opts for a countertop composed of more than one surface. If you're assuming that you'll pay a premium for buying only a small section of a secondary countertop stone or if

you're worried that your counter will end up looking more patchwork than put together, you may be limiting your design options based on misconceptions.

SOLUTION: Mix it up: Choose one material for the majority of your counter space and add other elements such as a butcher block for chopping or decorative glass or stone on your center island. "Mixing up countertop materials is more visually interesting and it gives the room a more personal feel," says Kristine Le Vernois, CKD, a design consultant with Neil Kelly in Lake Oswego, Ore. "It can also help your budget because you can use remnants which are less expensive than buying an entire slab. It's great that you can have the best of all worlds design-wise *and* save money!"

5 Trying to install new countertops yourself.

Resist the urge to save a few bucks by putting in your new counters. Besides the headache of trying to get correct measurements and level surfaces, you could void the manufacturer's warranty. "Many manufacturers train professionals to install their countertops a certain way, and they're responsible for the materials and labor," says Steven Mast, the sales manager for Precision Countertops in Portland. "If a certified installer doesn't do the installation, the manufacturer won't be responsible for damages down the road."

SOLUTION: Go for a pro. "Professional installers do this every day," says Mast, "and they know how to make things level and straight." And look at the big picture: in a kitchen remodeling job, new countertops are one of the most visible—and most used—elements. Pay for professional installation and save the penny-pinching for something less noticeable.

6 Choosing your countertop material based on its square-foot price.

Think those square-foot estimates are the *real* bottom line? Think again. "Besides the square-footage charge, a variety of things—different edge profiles, cuts and inserts—go into the total cost of your countertop," says Mast. There's also the waste factor: Stone typically comes in slabs that are about 50 feet long, so if your countertop is super small, you end up paying for the whole slab and wasting

most of it. Likewise, if your counter is slightly larger than the slab size, you're forced to buy two slabs.

SOLUTION: Factor in every detail when asking for an estimate, and if you're bugging out about your budget, keep your design simple and your counters a standard size. Don't forget about the things you can't put a price on: durability, longevity and style. And remember that it's all relative—countertops are only about 10% of the total cost of an average kitchen remodel.

7 Using stainless steel in too thin a gauge.

Nothing completes the sleek contemporary look in a kitchen like durable, industrial-chic stainless steel. Unless, that is, the stainless steel is as thin as a sheet of tin foil and full of dents. "If the gauge is too thin it can both warp and dent easily," says Le Vernois. "Plus, it's noisy!" Go too thin and even normal wear and tear will turn your "indestructible" surface into a sagging, bent mess.

SOLUTION: Get stainless steel in a gauge that will withstand what family living really dishes out—that means nothing less than 18 gauge (1/16 inch). Keep in mind that you don't want to select a gauge that's too thick, either. "Fabricators need to be able to bend the steel to make it look good as a countertop," says Le Vernois.

8 Not doing a thorough job when you research countertop material and color options.

Just because you've been to a few stores around town and seen a handful of samples, don't assume that you're ready to select one to become your countertop. "You might only see 20 colors at one supplier, assume that's all that's available on the market and feel like you have to settle for a stone that you don't love," says Brandt. "But there is so much available; it's impossible for each supplier to stock everything."

SOLUTION: Do your legwork to see what stores in your area stock, then do a little homework to check out what they don't have on hand. Search the Web, order catalogs from manufacturers and browse home magazines for countertop design ideas as well as for the newest surface materials on the market. "And when it comes down to the installation of your countertops, do your homework on *that*, too, because a poor contractor can hack up a beautiful stone," says Brandt.

9 Overlooking butcher block surfaces for fear of contamination.

You've heard the rumors about wood countertops and cutting boards harboring bacteria from meat in their pores and knife-marks, so you couldn't possibly put one in your kitchen, right? Wrong! Recent studies show that wood is less hospitable to bacteria than synthetic surfaces, so meat-lovers no longer have to worry about their beloved butcher blocks.

SOLUTION: Save a space in your countertop design for a thick piece of wood that will be perfect for prepping meat and chopping veggies. Just be ready to care for it. "You've got to keep the surface clean and keep it oiled so it will heal," says Le Vernois. "Clean it each time you cut a different item—and don't forget to also clean your knife!"

10 Not providing enough legroom under countertops at which people will be perching (think breakfast bars and center island eating stations).

You've put in a beautiful center island for friends and family to relax at while you're cooking, but your countertop is as long as the cabinets and they can't even pull up a chair! In addition to the damage that countless knee-smacks and boot-kicks will do to your cabinets, this design shortcoming will make your kitchen an unpopular place for guests to hang out (and will leave you by the stove, solo).

SOLUTION: Work with a professional kitchen designer. He or she will measure your cabinets and extend your countertop 12 to 18 inches beyond the cabinets to allow for legroom. "A standard cabinet is 24 inches," says Novak, "so a typical countertop without seating—whether it's laminate, solid surface, stainless steel or granite—is going to be about 25 1/2 inches."

11 Installing a countertop surface that's too heavy for your cabinets to safely support.

Those smooth, solid slab countertops are stunning, but if you're planning on installing them over your old, creaky kitchen cabinets, you'd better come up with a Plan B. For some older or lower-end cabinetry, stone can be too much to bear. "Granite slabs are generally 5 feet by 9 feet and are either 2 or 3 centimeters thick, so they're pretty heavy," says Brandt. "They weigh 13 and 20 pounds per square foot, respectively."

Solution: Have a professional check out

your cabinets before you install your countertop surface. "Have the remodeling contractor or countertop installer take a look at the structural integrity of the cabinetry," warns Brandt. "They may have to do some additional bracing inside the cabinets."

12 Not taking advantage of the decorative opportunities of a backsplash.

Why go all out on a beautiful countertop, only to frame it with a bland, boring backsplash? This is the place to get creative in the kitchen: it's a great place for adding interest since it's one of the first design elements that people see. "You want to bring out detail in the backsplash because it's the part you see from a distance," says Le Vernois.

SOLUTION: Put a little personality into your backsplash. Use it to showcase splashes of color or materials that were too fragile or expensive to be used as the entire countertop. "This is an area where you can use more detail and visual interest so that you end up with a 'wow!' look that makes your kitchen unique," says Le Vernois.

13 Not leveling your cabinets before installing your new countertops.

Your kids may think it's funny when the lemons start 'chasing' the limes in a downhill race, but if you've invested time and money in new countertops only to discover that they've been set atop unlevel cabinets, you won't be laughing. "If you have cabinets that aren't level or if your floor has settled in one area, that's a big issue," says Mast. "With laminate and solid surface you can work around it and scribe to fit, but granite and Silestone don't bend very easily."

SOLUTION: Work with a professional remodeling contractor or countertop installer who will double-check your cabinets (without your old countertops on them) *before* installation day. If your cabinets aren't level, they'll have time to fix the problem.

14 Not including a stone slab for pastry making if your family includes an avid baker.

Nobody likes bread filled with gaping air holes or pastries with chewy dough, but if you forget to include a stone slab in your countertop plans, that's exactly what you could get. Some surfaces get too warm or are too porous for making great dough, leaving you with baked goods gone bad.

SOLUTION: Splurge on a stone section of countertop, either a whole counter length or simply a baking sheet-sized slab. Whether you're a weekend baker or a serious pastry pro, don't settle for flimsy plastic rolling sheets: for kneading and rolling out dough, there's no surface better than stone. "Stone can be cold, so it's easy to work pastry with," says Le Vernois, "and it's also a solid surface so you don't have to deal with bacteria lurking in cracks."

15. Plastering your countertops with dizzying patterns or blinding colors. A deep purple kitchen may seem like a great idea now, but how will it look a few years down the road? While your home *should* be an expression of your personality, a too-trendy color or cutesy pattern could end up looking dated. And, if you're going to be putting your house on the market sooner rather than later, your countertop choice could lower your chances of getting the price your house deserves.

SOLUTION: Strike a balance between designing for your personal taste and designing for the life of your house. "Ask yourself, *How long am I really planning to live in this home,*" says Le Vernois. "If you think you're going to be there a while, do something more custom that will reflect you, but remember: Remodeling is an investment in your home." And if you're dead set on having a bright color or pattern, make it a design element rather than the room's focal point. "Does the whole kitchen have to be purple? No!" says Le Vernois. "Maybe you do black around the outside edge of your countertops and accent with a little purple in the center to make a beautiful design statement."

16. Not ordering enough materials. You thought you measured your countertops accurately, but now that you're installing the laminate or laying down those tiles you're coming up short. If you go back for a second round of materials you could be stuck with colors that are not exactly the same or patterns that don't match up perfectly. Stone can be an even bigger nightmare because of the difference in looks from block to block. "If you bought a slab for your countertops but didn't figure in an island until six months later, you're not going to get the exact granite," says Mast.

SOLUTION: Aim for 100 percent accuracy

in both your measurements and your design. Make sure you've included all of the necessary elements in your plans, like islands, backsplashes and integrated sinks. And if you're purchasing a pre-formed or pre-cut countertop like solid surface or stone, have the fabricator measure your space and create templates.

17. Not getting creative with the shape of your countertop or center island. Think that the only available shape for your countertops is rectangular? "With concrete you can create countertops that are not just a horizontal surface, but countertops that are very sculptural forms," says Butler. The same goes for solid surface materials, too. These can both be poured or molded into almost any shape, from a lima-bean-shaped kitchen island to an 8-inch-thick slab that wraps around corners.

SOLUTION: Think of your kitchen less like just another room and more like a gallery, and seize the opportunity to inject a little personality into the space. "Look at your counter not just as a shape in your plan but as a three-dimensional piece," says Butler. "If you want something beyond just a slab on a cabinet, concrete is the way to go."

18. Opting for a sink that is top-mounted into the countertop rather than under-mounted. "I shake my head when someone spends a few thousand dollars on granite countertops for their kitchen and then tries to save a few hundred bucks by installing a top-mounted sink," says Mast. "An under-mount sink is attached from below and the sink cut-out is polished, so all your waste from wiping down your countertops slides right in. With a top-mount sink you've got a full lip to catch crumbs—and a ton of maintenance."

SOLUTION: Spend a little extra money on an under-mount sink and save yourself maintenance headaches. "It costs a little bit more because the sink cut-out has to be finished," says Mast, "but for the price, for aesthetics and for usability, an under-mount sink is definitely something you should look at."

19. Thinking that the stone you ordered six days ago from your stone supplier will be the same stone as the sample you fell in love with six months ago. You checked out some gran-

ite samples a few months ago and had your heart set on New Venetian Gold, but when it arrived it looked more like English Brown. Brandt says several factors contribute to this reality: First, stone is a natural material and its color and pattern is unpredictable from block to block; second, one quarry will sell stone to as many as 100 processors, each of which may call it a different name; and third, stone dealers sell off a block's-worth of slabs in a matter of weeks. "We have people who come in a few months before their remodeling project is going to start and we have to tell them that it's too early to pick out their material," says Brandt. "Don't order the slabs unless your fabricator is willing to store them, because in six months that stone will be gone."

SOLUTION: Think of the samples that you see months ahead of time as just that: samples. Use them to get a general idea of what you're looking for, but hold off on ordering until four to six weeks before you'll want your slabs installed. "The best advice I can give is to really look at your slab," says Brandt. "See what you're getting before you have it fabricated and installed because once it's been cut and the fabricator shows up at your door with 500 pounds of rock, it's too late to exchange it."

20. Choosing a countertop product that isn't a match with your lifestyle. Kool-Aid-obsessed kids and porous, stainable stone don't mix; people who use a gourmet kitchen more for show than for cooking don't need to worry about durability. Seems like a no-brainer, right? The thing is, when you fall head-over-heels for a beautiful surface, common sense flies right out the vent of your Miele cooktop hood. You think you'll be in heaven if you could only have that soft slab of marble, until you drop a dish on it and the chipped slab breaks your heart.

SOLUTION: Get real. "Look at your budget and how you'll *really* use your countertop," says Mast. And look for compromises. If you've got your heart set on stone but your wallet—or cleaning habits—won't hear of it, look for a laminate or solid surface that looks like stone. "There are so many great products out there, from engineered stones to natural granites to laminates to solid surface, and each has its benefits," says Mast. "Make sure you get what you actually need. That's how you'll be truly happy." □ —Beth Olsen

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