



INSTALLING LAMINATE COUNTERTOPS

The most popular choice for new kitchen countertops is plastic laminate (Formica™ is the brand name of the most common type). This material offers numerous styling options to fit your decor. The front and side edges can have rounded corners, or you can create a counter with two or three different colors on the edge. The **backsplash** (the piece, about 4" to 6" high, that covers the wall area immediately above the counter) can either be purchased separately or bought as part of a "one-piece" unit that has the counter molded together with a backsplash, with no seam or joint between the two. If your walls are "wavy," as in most older homes, then a separate backsplash usually works better; this separate piece can flex and bend to meet the wall, whereas the one-piece type can't. You can also buy matching **sidesplashes**, to protect the walls along the sides of the counter.

Most people buy the laminate already adhered to the wood form, virtually ready to install. (The advantage to such ready-made counters is that commercial shops have power clamps that can exert great pressure on the laminate as it is glued to the wood, as well as the tools and experience to do the job right.) You can buy a pre-made counter section from stock and then cut it to fit where you will install it, or you can accurately measure where the counter will be going and have it made to your exact size. Custom sizing costs about one-third more, but sometimes cutting laminate at home can be tricky.

However, you may not be able to get a ready-made counter in the style and color you desire; in such cases, you can buy the laminate in sheets, which you then glue onto a "blank" to form your counter. To construct the blank, glue two 3/4" sheets of plywood or particle board together and cut it to the desired size and shape for your counter. Then, cut a piece of the laminate to fit each exposed surface of the blank – including any edges. Glue the laminate to the blank with contact adhesive, and then run a **laminate roller** firmly over the entire surface to press it down. Remove any excess adhesive with mineral spirits, and let it set up overnight. If you desire separate backsplash and sidesplash sections, construct them in the same way as you did the countertop.

If your counter wasn't custom sized, you'll need to cut it to length. You'll need a **circular saw with a fine-toothed blade** – the finer the better. (The blade should be labeled "*for cutting plastic laminate.*") Turn the counter upside down, and put it on something stable. (Cutting with the counter upside down will reduce the chances of chipping the surface. Be sure to protect the surface of the counter with old rugs, so it won't get scratched.) Then, determine the desired length; if the counter will run between two walls, measure the distance between the walls at both front and back, and mark the counter with these measurements. (Remember, the counter is upside down, so be sure you get the measurements in the right places.) Draw a line that connects these points, and then use the saw to slowly cut the counter along the line.

To make the sink cutout, turn the counter back over, so its upper surface is on top. Locate the center of the cutout area – widthwise from the front of the counter to the backsplash, and lengthwise from one side of the sink base to the other. Draw a large cross, marking that intersection point. Then, if you are installing a new sink, center the template that comes with it

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over the intersection point and mark your cutting line as the as the template indicates. If you're re-installing your old sink, remove the faucet(s), turn the sink upside down and center it over the cross; trace around it, and mark your cutting line about 5/8" inside that tracing all the way around. **(Before you cut out the opening, double check that your sink will have enough clearance inside the sink base.)**

Begin your cut by drilling about a 3/4" hole at each corner. Then, again with the counter positioned upside down, cut out the rest of the opening using **a jigsaw with a fine-toothed plastic laminate blade**. Alternatively, you can use a **router** to cut out the opening, though you may need to make several passes at increasing depth. The countertop will be stronger if you round the corners of the opening slightly.

The sink should be mounted before you put the counter in place. *(See separate handout on "Installing a Kitchen Sink and Faucet.")*

When you are ready to install the counter, first put it into place to check the fit and make any adjustments needed. Then, there are a couple of ways to attach the counter to the base. If you want to glue the counter down, take the counter out, turn it over, and apply silicone caulk to all the edges where it touches the walls. In addition, apply construction adhesive on the bottom, where it contacts the cabinets. Flip the counter right-side-up and set it in. After you are sure that it is in its proper position, take a hammer and a block of scrap wood and tap fairly hard over the adhesive you applied, to drive out any air. Let it set for 24 hours before you use it.

On the other hand, if you want to be able to replace the counter before you buy new cabinet bases, you may choose to attach the counter with screws. Drive the screws from inside the cabinet base up through the wooden corner blocks on the underside of the counter. **Be very sure that the screws are long enough to extend into the wooden blocks, but *not* so long that they pierce the top of the counter.**

Install the backsplash using construction adhesive on the back and bottom surfaces. If possible, brace lengths of 2 x 4 against the opposite wall to apply pressure at several points along the backsplash, until the glue dries. Install sidesplashes in the same way.