

Worktop heights

There has been much controversy about the ideal height for the kitchen countertop – not least because it has to suit women (average height +1650 mm) and men (average height +1740 mm).

Recent studies suggest that the standard height of +900 mm is too low, and could be increased to +950 mm or even +975 mm. While it is true to say that it is more comfortable to work at a worktop that is too high rather than too low, worktops also have to suit elderly people whose height has shrunk, and not yet fully grown children. So in this respect the +900 mm height is not a bad compromise.

However, should tall clients want the worktops raised, this is simply done by increasing the plinth (toe recess) height. Conversely, lowering the height below +900 mm is now not really feasible as under-counter appliances have a more or less standard height at +850 mm. So, more important than the precise worktop height is the *underside* of the worktop which should not be less than +870 mm. The finished worktop height is then determined by the thickness of the worktop itself which, depending upon construction, is likely to be between 30 and 50 mm.

Worktops should project at least 20 mm in front of the base cupboard doors so as to allow hand or bin space to collect crumbs and to prevent drawer handles from pressing uncomfortably into the cook.

There is a school of thought that suggests the sink top should be some 50 mm higher than the surrounding worktops so as to raise the bottom of the sink bowl to a more comfortable height. But the resulting change in worktop levels can cause breakages, and does not allow heavy pans to be slid from sink to hob. Similarly, such tasks as hand whisking in a bowl are easier to do at table top height of +740 mm. But the advent of electric dishwashers, whisks and food processors has reduced considerably the amount of time needed to do these jobs, so the argument for higher sinks is less valid.

Having said that, there are still some occasional lengthy chores such as shelling peas or cutting up oranges for marmalade, which are more comfortable to do sitting down. So, in addition to the larger table, a small table outside the area of the kitchen 'triangle' would be an asset. An easier alternative is to use the adjacent dining table, covered with a protective cloth.

Cabinets: dimensions to note

A continuous toe recess at the bottom of all cabinets should be provided. This should not be less than +100 mm high and 75 mm deep.

Knee recesses under worktops should be at least 460 mm wide by 500 mm deep, and not lower than 150 mm below a worktop.

Wall cupboards should not be fixed lower than 400 mm above a counter, otherwise they will obscure the back of the counter.

Wall cupboard doors should not be too wide – 400 mm is the ideal maximum width to reduce the chance of banging one's head on a door if left open. Similarly in a narrow, two-sided kitchen, base cupboard doors should not be too wide.

Appliances: planning considerations

Waist-high mounted appliances, such as ovens and refrigerators, save backache and give a better view into the machines.

As these will be fitted into tall cabinets, they will reduce the amount of worktop surface, so may not be suitable for the smaller kitchen.

Free-standing under-counter appliances can be mounted on castored platforms. Note that this may mean a higher worktop height. This is to make them easier to pull out for servicing, particularly useful for laundry machines, which often require frequent attention.