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## Finding a Home for the Microwave

by Dave Holbrook

You don't have to be a certified kitchen designer to notice that the microwave oven is typically treated like a leftover part. Ridiculous, because microwaves have long since grown from toaster-oven size to that of whole-turkey zappers. Unless your clients actually *want* the microwave to occupy valuable countertop real estate, many locations in the average kitchen can be designed or modified to accommodate this bulky appliance.

To pick the best location, first determine who'll be using the microwave the most and what they'll use it for. A microwave that's used as a principal appliance should be located somewhere between the refrigerator and the sink for convenience. If the primary cook isn't the primary user, a location outside the main work triangle makes sense. For example, the microwave could be located toward the family side of a snack bar, somewhere in line with the refrigerator to minimize interference with other kitchen activities (see Figure 1).

Remember that whatever comes out of the microwave will be hot and will require an immediately adjacent landing area for safety. The vast majority of microwaves are hinged on the left-hand side and so are best placed to the left of the landing area.

### Over the Counter

Even if there's countertop space to spare, standard countertop height isn't necessarily the best height for a microwave. Ergonomic studies show that the most convenient height for placing items in and removing them from a microwave is somewhere between 2 inches below and 10 inches above the elbow of the primary user (Figure 2).

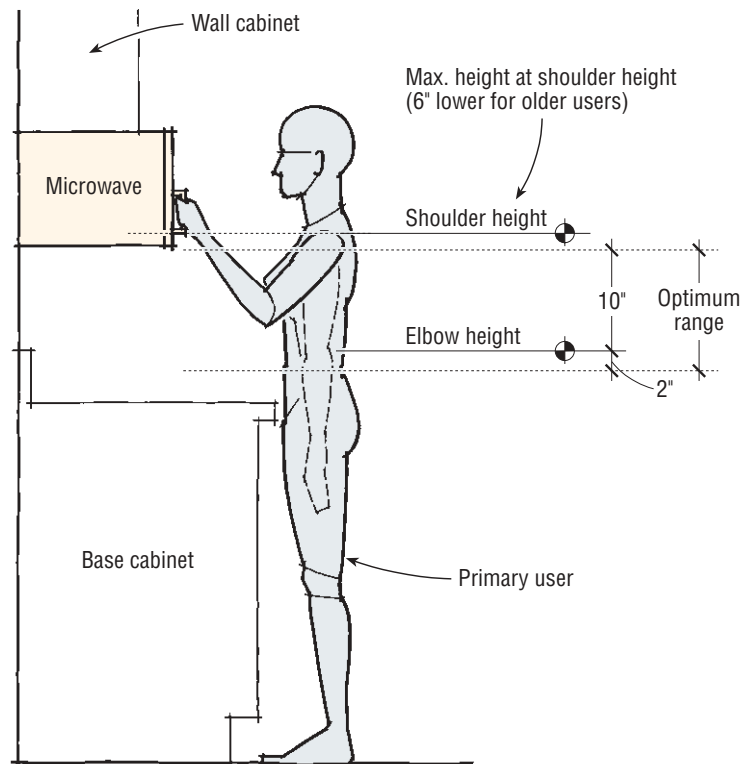
If that user is about 5-foot-6, countertop height is probably fine, keeping



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**Figure 1.** To keep casual snackers from colliding with the primary cook, install the microwave adjacent to the dining counter, in line with the refrigerator yet outside the main work triangle.

## Microwave Height



**Figure 2.** For safety, as well as ease of use, the microwave should be placed no higher than the shoulder height of the primary user. Six inches below shoulder height is better for older users. The most convenient height, according to ergonomic studies, is between 2 inches below and 10 inches above the user's elbow height.

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in mind that the interior of the oven will be a couple of inches higher than the surface it's placed on.

Recognized safety criteria state that the oven shelf should be located no higher than the principal user's shoulder height and preferably 6 inches lower than shoulder height. In any case, the cook should be able to look into the oven and look down upon the food item.

In fact, the average user will have few complaints with a microwave installed in the bottom line of wall cabinets, with its interior shelf or rack about 54 inches above the finished floor.

In some instances, you may not need a special wall cabinet. Just raise an existing 24-inch-wide cabinet by a foot (provided ceiling height allows) and hang the oven from its underside. The resulting staggered cabinet lineup plays right into the current design trend. Or order a 24-inch-high cabinet to fit between the standard 30-inchers. Many ovens are designed and sized for over-the-counter (OTC) mounting and offer optional hanging kits, while others rest on an open shelf (Figure 3). Sharp's line of OTC ovens includes a built-in task light for uninterrupted countertop illumination.

### Below the Counter

Considering the above guidelines, dropping the oven below countertop level may not seem like a sensible option. But, again, ideal height depends on the stature and flexibility of the primary user. Some people use the microwave from a sitting position, whether heating tacos at a snack bar or frozen waffles at the kitchen table. And some use the oven only occasionally and can afford to lower its profile without serious inconvenience (Figure 4).

Most users under the age of 18 use the microwave to the near exclusion of every other kitchen appliance and are the least likely to complain about its location.



**Figure 3.** Whether hung from the underside of a wall cabinet (left) or resting on a shelf (right), the microwave is at a convenient height when inserted among wall cabinets. Liberated countertop is task-lit by an integral light in some models.



**Figure 4.** Mounted low under a countertop, a microwave can serve as a teen feeding station or do occasional dirty work in a gourmet's kitchen.


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### Microwave Station

Maybe the kitchen's current design won't readily give up space above or below the countertop. In that case, look to adjacent wall areas for usable space. A microwave can be set up as an independent station, complete with a prep surface and dedicated storage. Plastic wrap, paper plates, microwave-safe dishes, and other microwave-related implements are handiest if stored in the immediate vicinity of the oven. A classic hutch-style cabinet can house the microwave in style, while providing counter space and storage (Figure 5).

**Multitasking.** A microwave can easily share space with a conventional wall oven in a typical tall cabinet. It's best to think in terms of priorities when deciding on stack order. In most households, the microwave will be used often during the day and so deserves to be installed above the oven for convenient access (Figure 6).

Consider also the possibility of combining functions. If your client doesn't require maximum oven capacity, appliances like the Ultima Cook Oven (KitchenAid, 800/422-1230, [www.kitchenaid.com](http://www.kitchenaid.com); \$1,230) and the g<sup>2</sup>microven (Whirlpool, 800/253-1301, [www.whirlpool.com](http://www.whirlpool.com); price not yet available) combine convection, broiling, and microwave functions in a 1.4-cubic-foot, single wall unit (Figure 7).

**Just because you can doesn't mean you should.** A common, but not always advisable, option is the microwave/vent-hood combination appliance, installed above the cooktop. In effect, you're getting a downgrade in blower performance, but that's not the worst of it — imagine a child on a stepstool groping for a microwave mini-pizza over a spitting pan of bacon or a steaming pot. Keep safe use in mind. 



**Figure 5.** When other locations prove inconvenient or unavailable, an unused blank wall area can be pressed into service as a stand-alone microwave center.



**Figure 6.** Consider sharing a conventional wall-oven cabinet with a built-in microwave oven. As a primary-use appliance, the microwave should occupy the top slot for convenient access.



**Figure 7.** If it's got to be one or the other, you can still get both with a combination convection and microwave oven.