Do Cats Always Land on Their Feet?

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Q. Is it true that cats always land on their feet?

A. If cats fall a short distance, they can almost always right themselves and land on their feet. If they fall more than one or two floors, however, they may sustain severe or even fatal injuries. The number of cats who become injured from falling is increasing, partially because of the large number of multi-story apartment buildings. Cats who are injured during falls are often said to have 'high rise syndrome.'

The uniqueness of the cat's skeleton is one of the reasons they can right themselves so quickly. Cats do not have a collarbone, and the bones in their backbone have more mobility than in many other animals. For these reasons, cats have free movement of their front legs and they can easily bend and rotate their bodies. This allows them to land feet first. Their feet and legs can cushion the impact. This righting reflex begins to appear at 3-4 weeks of age, and is perfected at 7 weeks.

If cats fall a larger distance such as two or more floors, even though they can right themselves, their legs and feet can no longer absorb all of the shock. Their heads may hit the ground and they often bruise their chin and may fracture some teeth. Falls of four or more floors cause the cat to hit the ground at maximum velocity and thus acquire a multitude of injuries including a ruptured diaphragm, torn liver, and fractured bones.

There are certainly instances of cats falling only a short distance and acquiring severe injuries. For the safety of your cat, always be sure upstairs windows are screened. Balconies and upstairs porches should be off-limits unless screened or cats are restricted from the edges and railings with the use of a harness and leash. (Be sure the leash is short enough to prevent the cat from jumping on the railing, or reaching the edge of the porch.)

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