

Saving Serafina

FELINE HIGH-RISE SYNDROME

One foot precisely placed in front of the other, displaying a balancing act rarely surpassed, Serafina navigates the narrow two-inch walkway high above the ground. She leaps over obstacles in her way, landing solidly beyond them, determined to reach her destination. Olympic gymnast? Circus high-wire artist? No, Serafina is a common house cat.

Few mammals can outshine the cat in balance, leaping ability and depth perception – all talents needed for a predator who, for thousands of years, had hunted at least some of her meals from trees. The single-tracking foot placement of the cat allows her to move across thin tree branches as well as the narrow back of a sofa. Powerful rear leg muscles and relatively large hind feet enable her to explode in a forward or upward thrust, while keen depth perception ensures that the cat seldom misses her target, be it windowsill or morsel of prey.

Should the bough break or the counter prove too slippery, do not fear – the cat comes equipped with a righting mechanism. The feline's fast-working nervous system and flexible spine enable the cat to right herself to a feet-first position before falling twenty-four inches. Spongy paw pads cushion the landing. In falls from fairly high places, the cat will extend her spine and stretch out her limbs in a sort of "flying squirrel" likeness that slows the fall's velocity. This allows some cats to survive plunges from twenty-plus floors. But these capabilities too often give pet owners a false sense of security regarding a cat's safety.

Balance isn't enough

In warm weather, cats frequently are spotted snoozing in open windows or sunning themselves on fire escapes. Their caretakers are unconcerned because they believe that their cats are creatures of good sense and uncanny balance. If that is the case, why are the cat wards of urban veterinary hospitals filled with felines suffering shattered jaws, punctured lungs and broken limbs and pelvises? Why do these acrobatic daredevils come crashing down to the ground with such frequency that the veterinary profession has named the complaint – High-Rise Syndrome (HRS)?

One reason for HRS may be that napping cats, like humans, experience both REM (Rapid Eye Movement) and deep sleep. The muscle twitches and dreaming associated with REM sleep can result in enough movement and disorientation to knock a cat off a narrow ledge. The intense prey drive of some cats also may be their undoing, causing them to leap out at a passing bird or insect before considering the consequences. And in a few cases, cats may fearfully flee out of an open window to avoid unusual or sudden goings-on in the house or apartment. More than one

cat has escaped out the opening left by an air conditioner removed for servicing. All of these scenarios lead to HRS, which results in medical expenses and a cat's intense pain and suffering – or death.

Why take chances?

With a little forethought, calamity can be avoided. Make sure all windows have been fitted with snug, sturdy screens before opening them. Adjustable screens should be tightly wedged into window frames. Use your air conditioner instead of taking a chance on flimsy screens that can be nudged out of the way by a determined cat. Before allowing your cat out on a balcony or terrace, check that she cannot fit through ironwork or lounge on the balustrade.

If a cat can fit her head through an opening, her body usually can be worked through as well. Use deck netting or wire mesh to insure safety, and only allow the cat access when properly supervised. If construction or service work leaves an open hole in a wall, keep your cat out of the area.

Let's insure that Serafina's feline acrobatics will be wowing her appreciative family audience for years to come.

