

Cat Furniture Safety

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger explains how to keep your cat safe on furniture such as cat trees.

By Marilyn Krieger, CCBC

Posted: September 4, 2009 3:00 a.m. EDT

Q: My two young cats, Cheetah and Xeva, love to climb and play on tall cat furniture throughout the house. They also run as fast as they can on shelves my husband built especially for them. A week ago, Cheetah lost his footing and fell about 6 feet, landing on his back and twisting one leg. Luckily he got away with only a very bad sprain. Along with being scared out of my wits, I was surprised because I thought cats always landed on their feet. What can I do to prevent this from happening again? Should we dismantle the shelves and take down the trees? Both cats love being up on them. I don't want to deprive them of their high times, but I want them to be safe.

A: Removing the vertical territory is not the answer since cats need high places. Instead, make the shelves and cat trees safe areas for Cheetah and Xeva to perform their gymnastics on. As demonstrated by Cheetah, cats don't always land on their feet when they fall. Recently, one of my cats had a similar experience. Maulee, my 15-year-old, fell 7 feet, resulting in a serious laceration that needed immediate surgery.

Cats need high places to hang out and climb on. Along with feeling safe and providing runways, vertical territory is one way cats demonstrate their hierarchy to each other. Cats can also survey their world from up high, checking out where the other members of the household are and the location of any pieces of stray food that somehow escaped their scrutiny.

Safety is the answer. Take a few precautions to minimize accidents that can happen on high shelves and furniture. Cat furniture needs to be stable and solid so they won't fall over. Some cat trees benefit from adding large pieces of plywood to the bottom of the structures so that they don't topple over during an intense game of chase or a running frenzy. Securing cat trees to the wall can also help stabilize the structures. The shelves on the trees need to be large enough to accommodate one or two cats comfortably. I like shelves that have a lip or high edge around them. Beds or towels can be placed in them without risk of their slipping off the shelf while a cat is napping. Be careful with cat furniture that is buyer assembled. The pieces need to be tightly screwed together so that the tree doesn't wobble or fall apart when the cats jump between shelves.

Shelves and perches that are attached to walls should be wide enough to accommodate both cat racing and napping. I recommend shelves that are a minimum of 10 inches wide. Twelve is much better. Also, adding a 2- to 4-inch high barrier on the exposed shelf edges can help keep beds or towels from sliding off. When attaching shelves to the wall, make sure they are solidly in place, anchored to studs or secured in some way that ensures they can take the weight of rambunctious cats jumping and playing on them.

Additionally, there should be multiple ways for the cats to go up and down from the shelves and the cat trees so that they can't be cornered at the top. Furniture and shelves should be configured and placed at different heights and levels so that the cats don't have long distances to jump and they have plenty of navigation options.

The Cat Channel has a creative readership. I invite you to add your ideas on how to make vertical territory safe for cats in the comment section under the column.