

Cat Myths

by Karen Commings

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Cats Have Nine Lives

Exactly how the symbolic number nine became associated with cats is unclear. Nine has been a symbol of mysticism and power throughout the ages - the Egyptian pantheon, the River Styx, the Norse god, Odin, and even Christianity. The Egyptians worshiped cats. Mohammed cut off the sleeve of his robe to avoid waking a sleeping cat. In India and Africa, killing a cat was thought to bring bad luck. In more recent history, cats have been associated with witchcraft and a cat's nine lives may be an extension of the Threefold Law which says good or evil will come back to the perpetrator three times.

Cats have the ability to escape difficult situations with their own cleverness and dexterity, so attributing supernatural abilities to them may not have been a stretch for ancient cultures. Regardless of the connection's origin, the notion that cats have nine lives is one that has padded along with them into the twenty-first century. "Maybe cats have nine lives, but they can use them up all at once," says Drew Weigner, DVM, diplomate of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners, whose practice is The Cat Doctor in Atlanta, Georgia. "The best way to increase your cat's longevity is to keep him indoors. A second and third way to increase your cat's life span is to provide good nutrition and weight management."

Cats always land on their feet

The nineteenth century physician and father of cinematography, Etienne Jules Marey, used a special camera to illustrate how cats twist their bodies 180 degrees when falling to land feet first. "It's a reflex action," says Dr. Weigner. "Cats almost always land on their feet if they have enough time to turn their bodies around, but not if they fall from very short heights." Cats without tails, such as the Manx, can land on their feet as well. "The cat's tail fine tunes balance, but isn't necessary to landing on their feet."

To keep your cat from falling if you live in a high rise, put screens in your windows and keep them secured. Let your cat on the balcony only under your supervision.

Neutered cats gain weight

Some people avoid neutering their cats for fear of the cat gaining weight. "There is some evidence that the loss of androgenic hormones (estrogen; testosterone) will promote weight gain but it's minor," says Dr. Weigner. "It's more a matter of ounces than pounds." An adult cat that is neutered will lose some muscle mass but gain body fat. "You may see some change, but overall, it's little difference," says Dr. Weigner.

What's true for you is true for your cat. Weight gain is caused by consuming too many calories and expending too few. "Cats that are neutered are primarily indoor cats that eat more and exercise less," says Dr. Weigner.