

## **Pills and the Pilot**

by Richard A. Hansen, M.D., AME

Eagerly anticipating his first solo flight, Joe looked excited. The sniffles and congestion would not bother him, he thought. But his nose was not clear, and there was pressure on the ears. Maybe one of those over-the-counter cold tablets could clear things up. The day was just too perfect to postpone this long-awaited adventure. Common sense told him that those magic pills could have side effects, but he wasn't worried. Surely a little drowsiness could be overcome by an extra cup of coffee. And he could catch up on that last night of fitful sleep with a nap later in the day. So it was off to the airport, and Joe climbed into the cockpit with his box of tissues, his headset, and the checklist.

Fortunately, for the first part of his lesson, an instructor was required. And when he found out about the sniffles, and asked a few questions about the home remedies, Joe just had to wait a few days for that special moment. He had pushed the limits, and needed to learn another lesson, namely to check out the pilot as well as the plane, before exposing his teacher to the cold germs, or himself to the risk of getting drowsy or dizzy, when maximum alertness was needed for his memorable solo flight.

There are many drugs that can affect a pilot's performance, whether in small planes or the pressurized high-altitude complex variety. Some of the decongestants used for allergies and cold symptoms can cause anxiety, palpitations, and the "jitters." Antihistamines frequently cause drowsiness, as do cough suppressants also used for respiratory infections. Pain pills can trigger an upset stomach, as well as dizziness, and loss of alertness. Pilots just should not fly when an intestinal upset causes them to feel nauseous, or the rumblings in the mid abdomen indicate the likelihood of diarrhea. Headache remedies are also at risk of causing impairment of reaction time, and some can produce prolonged drowsiness. Even over-the-counter sleeping pills can be trouble, when mixed with fatigue, cockpit noise, and the stress of critical decision-making.

Be sure to read the labels on all medications, looking for the list of side effects. Never fly after taking a new medication for the first time. And, remember that you should not fly if the underlying condition that you are treating would make you unsafe if the medication fails to work. In other words, that go/no-go decision needs to take into account not just the airworthiness of your plane, and the sky conditions overhead, but the health of the pilot-in-command. That's the one whose life's on the line every time you take off to reach for the sky.

Prescription medications are another matter. When your physician opens his prescription pad, ask first about the safety of using that medication while flying. You may want to ask your doctor to contact your aviation medication examiner to discuss the implications for flying, if he or she is inexperienced with aerospace physiology or the altitude effects of a drug. You could sometimes develop a medical condition that is not safe to fly with. Before making any decision to put yourself or a passenger at risk, be sure to consider all medication issues. Treat every drug with caution. And, like the student, Joe, mentioned above, learn to avoid every pill you possibly can, with a keen eye for the cause of illness, and a wary attitude toward drug side effects. You can become one of those "old" pilots, not the "bold" ones.

*[Doctor Hansen, author of the popular book on home health care, **Get Well At Home**, currently serves as medical director of the **Emerald Valley Wellness Clinic**, and its **Live-for-Health Seminars** in Creswell, Oregon. Pilots who for health reason are having trouble passing their medical should contact us.]*