

Flying on Medications

by
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Pilots have a special perspective on health, especially when they visit the doctor. While most people want to stay healthy for reasons pertaining to family, work, or just a desire to live and not to be sick, pilots think more in terms of their flying privilege. Once every year or two that piece of paper called the Medical Certificate assumes major importance. In other words, for a pilot the fear of not flying may even take precedence over the fear of dying.

Generally, the pilots I know are people of integrity, very honest when it comes to reporting altitude, position, flying experiences, and airplane maintenance. But, occasionally when they visit their AME, a natural tendency to “forget” to report a medication or illness becomes apparent. Like other governmental agencies such as the NTSB, the local Sheriff, or any judge, doctors hear all kinds of stories. And, we not infrequently meet folk who like to con their doc into a prescription or work release or other signed document. So, we get not a little wary, even suspicious, when a pilot sounds too cavalier about his health status, especially when we see a middle aged man or retired pilot who takes absolutely no medications and who has ‘never’ had an illness or hospitalization.

You would think that the fact that a serious penalty for falsification outlined just above the place for pilot’s signature on the Form 8500-8 would be sufficient incentive to come up with the true story. Who wants to even think of the potential revocation of his pilot certificate, a fine up to \$250,000 and even imprisonment for up to five years? And such penalties, though rare, have happened. In 2008 a judge sentenced a pilot to 16 months in prison and two years of probation for repeatedly lying about his insulin-dependent diabetes on the application form. In that case, the pilot experienced a diabetes-related seizure while flying a twin-engine transport plane with four passengers aboard. Amazingly, the disorientation of this pilot did not cause a fatal crash, due to the quick thinking of passengers, who subdued the pilot, and helped a young student pilot into the right seat. She landed the plane on the runway, successfully except for failing to extend the landing gear. Thus a potential disaster was narrowly abated.

Then, there is the issue of other medications. Winter is the season for colds and congestion, with many medications available to alleviate the myriad of symptoms. Antihistamine use is common, to dry the sinuses or nose, and improve breathing ability. In 2003, though, a florida pilot was killed when his Cessna 441 suddenly plummeted to the ground in clear VMC weather. The NTSB investigation found more than ten times the usual dose of chlorpheniramine in his blood. This over-the-counter antihistamine, sometimes called Chlortrimeton, has a high risk of sedation or drowsiness even in normal dosage. The hapless pilot had taken ten times the normal dosage before his

flight. The same thing could have happened with pain pills, tranquilizers or alcohol.

There are good reasons for the FAA regulations pertaining to mind-altering medications and drugs which impair alertness, vision, or rapid decision-making ability. Flying is simply too complex an operation to go up in the left seat with any chemical handicap. As mentioned above, the results are often fatal, including passengers or even innocent victims on the ground.

There is no reason not to pick up the phone and discuss any health questions with your personal physician or your AME. Our training has equipped us to advise pilots which medications might be safe to take, and which the FAA merely wants recorded on the application form, or which medicines might completely disqualify a pilot from flying safely. Cover-ups are rarely successful when it comes to passing your Medical. It is far better to be truthful and candid concerning your health status, and as we all know, honesty is the best policy in other areas of life as well, such as marriage, business, even politics.

It is always our purpose , as your personal AME, to help you pass your exam, and to fly safely for as long as your health permits, your pocket book affords, and your family approves. We all have much to gain from aviation safety. And, in this time of economic change, and even uncertainty about the future of general aviation, it behooves us even more to keep our flying record clean, accident -free, and with a great comradery among the pilots we know and admire.

*[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. For further information or inquiries, contact: **clinic1@emeraldwellness.com**]*