



Federal Aviation
Administration

Medications and Flying



Does this story sound familiar?

It's Sunday morning, the last day of a three-day trip. You have four hours of flying ahead of you to get back home, but something about the air conditioner last night has left you with stuffy nose and sinuses this morning. You know from your training and experience that flying with congested upper airways is not a good thing. As it turns out, one of the others on the trip has some new over-the-counter sinus pills that are “guaranteed” to unstop your breathing passages and let you fly without any worries about the congestion. *Should you take the medication?*

Another scenario

You and your spouse are on the second leg of a five-leg, cross-country flight. While visiting relatives, you stayed up late at the party they threw in your honor, ate too much, and the next morning your stomach feels sort of queasy. Your spouse, a non-pilot, offers you a common motion-sickness pill prescribed by her doctor. Should you take the medication?

Get the facts

Just like any other decision (equipment, weather, etc.) that you must make when you fly, you should know all the facts before you can answer this question. There are several things that you need to know and take into account before you make the go/no-go decision. Add these to your check list:

First, **consider the underlying condition that you are treating.** What will be the consequences if the medication doesn't work or if it wears off before the flight is over? A good general rule to follow is not to fly if you must depend on the medication to keep the flight safe. In other words, if the untreated condition is one that would prevent safe flying, then you shouldn't fly until the condition improves — whether you take the medication or not.

Second, you must **consider your reaction to the medication.** There are two broad categories of medication reactions. One is a unique reaction based on an individual's biological make-up. Most people don't have such reactions but anyone can, given the right medication. Because of this, you should NEVER fly after taking any medication that you have not taken before. It is not until after you have taken the medication that you will find out whether you have this uncommon and unexpected reaction to the medication.

Third, **consider the potential for adverse reactions**, or side effects — unwanted reactions to medications. This type of reaction is quite common, and the manufacturer of the medication lists these on the label. You **MUST** carefully read all labeling. If you don't have access to the label, then don't fly while using the medication.

Look for such key words such as lightheadedness, dizziness, drowsiness, or visual disturbance. If these side effects are listed or if the label contains a warning about operating motor vehicles or machinery, then you should not fly while using the medication.

Side effects can occur at any time, so even if you've taken the same medication in the past without experiencing side effects, they could still occur the next time. For this reason, you must never fly after taking a medication with any of the above-noted side effects.

Common side-effects of frequently used medications

If you must take over-the-counter medications,

- Read and follow the label directions.
- If the label warns of significant side effects, do not fly after taking the medication until at least two dosing intervals have passed. For example, if the directions say to take the medication every 6 hours, wait until at least 12 hours after the last dose to fly.
- Remember that you should not fly if the underlying condition that you are treating would make you unsafe if the medication fails to work.
- Never fly after taking a new medication for the first time.
- As with alcohol, medications may impair your ability to fly—even though you feel fine.
- If you have questions about a medication, ask your aviation medical examiner.
- When in doubt, don't fly.

Common side-effects of frequently used medications

Problem	Type of Medication	Example	Potential side effects
Colds, congestion, and allergies	- Decongestant - Antihistamine	Pseudoephedrine (Sudaphed®) Diphenhydramine Benadryl®)	Palpitations, jitteriness, anxiety, drowsiness
Cough	- Cough suppressant	Dextromethorphan (Robitussin DM®)	Dizziness, drowsiness
Fever	- Antipyretic	Aspirin	Ringing in ears, upset stomach
Pain	- Analgesic	Ibuprofen (Motrin®)	Dizziness, upset stomach
Nausea / Vomiting	- Antinauseant	Dimenhydrinate (Dramamine®)	Drowsiness
Diarrhea	- Antidiarrheal	Loperamide (Imodium®)	Drowsiness
Acid reflux	- Antacid	Ranitidine (Zantac®)	Headache, nausea
Constipation	- Laxative	Various	Abdominal cramping, diarrhea
Overweight	- Diet pill	Ephedrine (Ephedra)	Palpitations, jitteriness, anxiety, heart attack, stroke
Insomnia	- Sleeping pills	Diphenhydramine (Tylenol PM®)	Prolonged drowsiness and impairment of reaction times

Prescription Medications

When your treating physician prescribes a medication for you, be sure to ask about possible side effects and the safety of using the medication while flying. Since most of their patients are not pilots, many physicians don't think about the special needs of pilots when they prescribe medication. You must also discuss the medical condition that is being treated. You may want to ask your physician to contact your aviation medical examiner to discuss the implications of flying with the medical condition and the medication.

When your pharmacy fills the prescription, let the pharmacist know that you are a pilot. Pharmacists are experts in medication side effects and can often provide advice that supplements the information that your physician gives you. The pharmacist will provide you with written information about your medication. You should treat this just like the label of an over-the-counter medication mentioned above. Read, understand, and follow the information and instructions that are given with the medication. Never hesitate to discuss possible problems with your physician, pharmacist, or aviation medical examiner.

The Bottom Line

What you must remember about medications

Sometimes...

...you will develop a medical condition that is not safe to fly with. Whether you take a medication for the condition or not, you should wait to fly until the condition is either gone or significantly improved.

...you will have an ongoing (chronic) medical condition that your physician has prescribed a medication to treat. You should discuss the medical condition and treatment with your physician, pharmacist, and aviation medical examiner and make your flying decision based on their advice.

...you will have a medical condition that makes you uncomfortable but does not impair your ability to safely fly. If flying is very important, you may take either over-the-counter medications or prescription medications — within the guidelines suggested above.

Flying is important for many reasons. Not one of these reasons, however, is worth risking your life or the lives of those around you. Treat all medications with caution, and you'll be around to become one of the "old" pilots.

MEDICAL FACTS FOR PILOTS

Publication OK05-0005

Written by:

Steve Carpenter, MD

Prepared by:

Federal Aviation Administration Civil Aerospace Medical Institute
Aerospace Medical Education Division

To order copies of this brochure, contact:

FAA Civil Aerospace Medical Institute

Shipping Clerk, AAM-400

P.O. Box 25082

Oklahoma City, OK 73125

Telephone: (405) 954-4831

Other Pilot Safety Brochures Available

Number	Title
AM-400-94/2	Alcohol and Flying: A Deadly Combination
AM-400-95/2	Altitude Decompression Sickness
OK05-0270	Carbon Monoxide: A Deadly Threat
AM-400-03/2	Deep Vein Thrombosis and Travel
AM-400-91/1	Hypoxia: The Higher You Fly, the Less Air...
AM-400-98/3	Hearing and Noise in Aviation
AM-400-97/1	Introduction to Human Factors in Aviation
AM-400-92/1	Over the Counter Medications and Flying
AM-400-98/2	Pilot Vision
AM-400-95/1	Smoke!
AM-400-00/1	Spatial Disorientation: Visual Illusions
AM-400-03/1	Spatial Disorientation: Why You Shouldn't Fly By the Seat of Your Pants
AM-400-01/1	Physiological Training Courses for Civil Aviation Pilots
AM-400-05/1	Sunglasses for Pilots: Beyond the Image

Physiological Training Classes for Pilots

If you are interested in taking a one-day aviation physiological training course with altitude chamber and vertigo demonstrations or a one-day survival course, learn about how to sign up for these courses that are offered at 14 locations across the U.S. by visiting this FAA Web site:

www.faa.gov/pilots/training/airman_education/