



Is the FAA Flight Physical really necessary?

The sports pilot certificate has allowed pilots to get into the air without seeing an aviation medical doctor. The medical requirements are such that if you have a valid driver's license and no "known medical deficiencies" you can operate an aircraft not weighing more than *1,320 lbs*, and operate up to 10,000ft (of course other FAA rules and requirements apply).

You would qualify for this medical "exemption" only if there was no prior denial, suspensions or revocations of a medical application to the FAA in the past. In other words if you were denied an FAA medical, you do not qualify for the sports pilot certificate. If healthy, the pilot's driver's license is proof enough that the airman is in good health. (Was there a physical exam involved with getting a drivers license? My Arizona driver's license expires in 2020).

*It should be noted that "Long-standing FAA regulation, § 61.53, prohibits **all pilots-- those who are required to hold airman medical certificates and those who are not--from exercising privileges during periods of medical deficiency"***

So, if the sports pilots can fly without seeing an AME, why not the rest of us? Is the FAA medical necessary? If you hold a first, second or third class medical you must have periodic check ups with an AME. Besides the fact that this is a legal requirement, there are several reasons that a pilot should be examined by an FAA Aviation Medical Examiner.

The most obvious reason is to exclude the pilots that are not medically safe to fly. I think that this is most important in commercial aviation, where the AME has a duty to protect the flying public. There needs to be a safe air transportation system that provides a screening process to decrease the risk of a pilot becoming incapacitated at the controls of an aircraft due to an underlying medical condition. These airline pilots usually are required to get an exam every 6 months to maintain a first class medical.

What about the private pilots that require a 3rd class medical? How common are denials of a 3rd class medical certificate? According to the FAA "Over the past 3 years, the number of denials of third-class airman medical certificates has ranged from approximately 2000 to 2500 per year based on approximately 135,000 to 140,000 applications for third-class airman medical certification per year. Most of these denials resulted because of a failure of the applicants to provide sufficient information for the FAA to make a favorable decision".

As a full time AME I have had several pilots of all classes that I think could have put themselves and the public at risk if they didn't have an FAA medical evaluation. A few examples of these cases are as follows:

The first case involved a first class airline pilot for a major airline. He was in his early 40's, and appeared to be in great shape. He had been exercising regularly, was a non smoker, and had no medical problems. It was discovered that he had a mild abnormality in his EKG that was done as part of his FAA medical examination. He was referred to a cardiologist and underwent an exercise stress test for further evaluation. He had a very abnormal result and had a diagnostic cardiac catheterization that revealed a 99% blocked coronary artery. He required a stent placement, and will be eligible to fly again in 6 months. He would have likely suffered a heart attack during flight if his condition was not discovered and treated.

A second example involved a 76 year old gentleman requesting a student pilot 3rd class medical. He filled out the FAA medical 8500-8 form and marked the "no" boxes on the entire form indicating that he has "never in his life" had any medical condition at all. It was discovered on his examination that his heart rate was very irregular, and he was suffering from a condition called atrial fibrillation (a heart condition where the upper heart chambers beat so quickly that it could ultimately result in a stroke or loss of consciousness). His exam also revealed that he had severe emphysema. He was referred to a cardiologist that same day and of course not issued a medical certificate.

The next example involved a 36 years old first officer for a major airline who presented to the office for a second class medical. He had no complaints at the time of his visit and had no significant medical history. His exam was normal, however his urine test revealed too much blood and protein. He was sent to a nephrologist(kidney specialist) after blood tests proved that his kidneys were functioning less than 25% normal capacity. He was diagnosed with a condition called an IGA nephropathy, and his disease was rapidly progressive. He will be starting dialysis within 2 months, and will be added to a kidney transplant list. If this condition was not discovered, the pilot could have become incapacitated at the controls.

I believe that the above cases demonstrate the importance of the flight physical not only for the benefit of the pilot, but the benefit of the public as well. I do not believe that a driver's license and self certification would have helped the above patients.

There are some pilot organizations that would like to see the 3rd class FAA medical exam eliminated. I hope their efforts are met with some resistance from the medical community and hopefully sound judgment and reasoning will prevail.

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