



Aeromedical Advisory

A Marathon ... Not a Sprint

When you hear the words “medical certification,” your first thought may well go to that piece of paper you carry in your flight bag. While it is indeed an important document — you can’t fly without it — the paper itself is only a small component in the process of medical certification. Your medical certificate means that you met the requirements for the specific class of medical that you applied for at the time of your exam, and that based on our research, you are likely to meet them for the length of your medical’s validity under 14 CFR section 61.23. But the issuance of that certification is just the beginning of the process. It is perhaps more akin to the green flag than the checkered flag of a race.

In this metaphor, your medical exam is like a technical inspection for your body before the race. You then have to keep meeting those standards throughout the race, just as you must continue to meet your medical standards in order to exercise the privileges of your pilot and medical certificates. While your health isn’t being measured to the millimeter or fraction of an inch like the highest forms of racing, you are still expected to ensure that you meet, to the best of your knowledge, the standard of the medical certificate you intend to exercise. This means a serious self-evaluation of your own condition before setting off on a flight.

You have almost certainly heard of the IM SAFE checklist, but how often do you actually pull it out before a flight and go through the items one at a time? Doing so helps ensure you don’t overlooking anything.

- I** Illness: Am I sick?
- M** Medication: Am I taking any medications?
- S** Stress: Am I under any stress?
- A** Alcohol: Have I had anything to drink in the last 8 hours?
- F** Fatigue: Am I tired and not adequately rested?
- E** Eating: Have I eaten enough proper foods lately?

It’s interesting to see how humans can rationalize. It’s easy to scoff at the idea of flying when you are

physically under the weather — “If I’m sick, of course I’m not going to fly.” By actually going through the checklist, though, we may be able to ward off some of the rationalizations we otherwise tend to make when we really want to fly. For example: I’ve had a headache for the last couple of days, but I’m not really sick. I’ve been taking aspirin for my headache, but that’s no big deal. Flying is my relaxation activity, so it’s not stressful. So what if I’ve been pushing hard at work to finish up this project? That’s why I had a beer last night, but that was 20 hours ago. I’m a little tired since I’ve been going in early and leaving late at work, but that’s no big deal either. And no problem on food; I grabbed a burger from the drive-thru on my way to the airport.

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Do any of these phrases sound familiar? Do any of them strike you as a potential problem? Any one of those items might not be an issue by itself, but the combination of factors could construct the proverbial accident chain. The point is not to say that this kind of scenario is disqualifying, but it clearly warrants closer consideration.

And that’s the point. Just as a series of small issues can combine to end our metaphorical race, a series of everyday life issues, even minor ones, can combine to result in tragedy. So while flying is fun, ensuring continued fitness to fly is absolutely critical to making sure the race has a happy ending.

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