

Health Promotion

Medication and Flying

Joint pain, nasal obstruction, abdominal upsets, or shortness of breath, may distract pilots and adversely affect their performance whilst on duty. It is worthwhile to note that these symptoms may also be aggravated by the side effects of the medication prescribed or bought over the counter, especially when new drugs are being developed and made available in the market rapidly. All these factors may affect a pilot's performance and may lead to incapacitation.

This article highlights some tips on how pilots and their treating doctors can help each other in preventing the use of medication that may degrade flying performance and impact flight safety.

For Pilots

- You should always be careful when using any kind of medication, whether it is prescribed, purchased over the counter, or purchased via the internet. Pay particular attention to those purchased from the internet as their quality may not be assured.
- Tell any doctor whom you consult regarding your occupation and how optimal physical and mental fitness is paramount for the safe performance of your duties.
- Ask your treating doctor about how your illness may affect your duty and whether the medication would affect your professional performance, fitness to work, and if there is any incapacitation risk.
- If your treating doctor is uncertain about the effects of the medication on your fitness to work, you can ask him to contact your Approved Medical Examiner (AME), or the Personnel Licensing Office of Hong Kong Civil Aviation Department (HKCAD) through email (plo@cad.gov.hk)
- If you have any questions about medication or health conditions that may affect flight safety in between your licensing medical examination, **contact your AME**. Your AME should know the legal requirements and has the aeromedical knowledge to help you and your treating doctor to find the best solution. The other option is to contact the Personnel Licensing Office of HKCAD.
- During your licensing medical examination, report to your AME of any illness and/or medication, including prescribed medication, self-medication, and herbal supplements.



For Pilot-treating Doctors

- Enquiring on your patients' occupational history is important – you need to know that your patient is a pilot.
- Ask the pilot about the working conditions of his/her job:
 - what are the physical and mental capacities needed;
 - if the workload is heavy, has he/she experienced fatigue; and
 - information in circadian aspects (e.g. night flying, early starts, time-zone crossing).
- Consider the effects of the illness and the medication you prescribe on the flying performance of your patient, i.e. whether they will affect the Central Nervous System functions, cognitive/psychomotor performance, alertness, consciousness, cardiovascular and respiratory system functions and sensory functions etc.
- A pilot is likely to be fit to fly if:
 - he/she can execute all functions on board even in difficult operational circumstances, e.g. flying in bad weather etc.;
 - there is no significant risk of sudden/subtle incapacitation; and
 - the flying activity is not expected to worsen his/her health condition.
- Consider whether initial treatment on a new medication or change of dose on an established medication may necessitate grounding of the pilot. (e.g. at present HKCAD's requirement is whenever there is a change or adjustment of a pilot's anti-hypertensive medication, the pilot will be grounded for at least 2 weeks or until no adverse effect is noticed.)
- Medication that may disqualify flying duties has at least one of the following effects:
 - causing impairment to Central Nervous System functions;
 - causing impairment to cognitive/psychomotor performance, alertness, consciousness;
 - causing impairment to cardiovascular and respiratory system functions; or
 - causing impairment to sensory functions (e.g. visual, auditory and vestibular functions etc.)
- If you have any doubts on the effects of illness and/or medication on a pilot's fitness to fly, or if the pilot has to be grounded, **consult the pilot's AME** or contact the Personnel Licensing Office of HKCAD.