

What Medications Can I Take While Flying?

This is a commonly asked question by Flight Attendants. The question itself indicates that Flight Attendants recognize the link between the use of medications and fitness for duty as well as the need to comply with drug and alcohol testing requirements. The question also may stem from the absence of a “No Fly” list of medicines that Flight Attendants must avoid before or during the performance of their duties. So, if Flight Attendants are safety sensitive professionals subject to DOT testing, why isn’t there such a list?

Flight attendants are not medically certified as are pilots. The decision about whether a flight attendant can fly using a prescription medication is a decision made by the flight attendant’s personal physician. The decision about whether a flight attendant can fly using an over the counter (OTC) medication is generally made by the flight attendant using her/his best judgment about how a substance does or might impact her/him.

Another reason why there isn’t a list is because of the vast number of new medications that enter the marketplace on a continuous basis. For flight attendants, this could also include non-domestic market streams. Were such a list created, it would have to be routinely and consistently updated. More importantly, a Flight Attendant might assume that if a medication is not on the list, then the medication is safe to take. How someone reacts to a medication can be very individualistic and very different from the norm, especially at 30,000 feet. Medication interactions and reactions is best left up to treating health care provider.

So without a list, how should a flight attendant navigate the choice points around medication use just before or during flying? Here are a few guidelines.

Never use any medicine that has alcohol as an ingredient (i.e. many cough medicines). An alcohol test positive is a positive. The source of the alcohol is not a factor considered when determining if you have violated alcohol regulations. If there is no ingredient list, don’t take it.

For prescription medications, make sure your treating doctor has a very clear understanding of your safety sensitive duties. Consider giving her/him your job description. Make sure she/he re-reads your job description each and every time a prescription medication is recommended. Be very clear to ask whether you can take this medication before and during the performance of your flight attendant duties. You can download a wallet size list of your essential safety sensitive duties at www.FADAP.org

Avoid using OTC medications/herbal supplements purchased overseas. The label may be incorrect and/or incomplete. The ingredients could contain substances that would cause you to test positive for a controlled substance.

Just before or during flight duty, only use an OTC medication that you have used before and that you know does not cause you performance altering side effects. Just because an OTC medication is agreeable with your flying partner does not mean that it will be agreeable with you and the performance of your duties. Try not to leave home without an emergency

supply of OTC medications that you know are agreeable with you and effective for treating frequent illnesses to which you are susceptible.

If you are starting a new medication or having the dosage of an existing medication adjusted, ask your doctor if any of the initial side effects that you may experience from these acts could compromise the performance of your safety sensitive duties. You and your doctor may have to do a little more planning around the initiation of new medications and/or changes in dosages.

If the prescription label of your medication directs you to take the medication daily, then assume that you may be challenged about taking the medication beyond the number of days for which daily medication was dispensed. (I.e. if you were given 30 tablets of a medication on July 1 with a label that says “take daily”, the medication would be exhausted, if taken as directed, on July 30th). If during the course of a medication, your doctor adjusts his/her directions on how you should use a prescribed medication (i.e. the doctor directs you to take the medication as needed or to take only half a dose), ask for a new prescription that bears that new direction on the label.

Understand that even if you have a medical explanation for taking a prescription, you could be pulled from flying for safety reasons.

A prescription that a Flight Attendant takes that contains amphetamines or opioids under the direction of an acting physician could result in a **lab** confirmed positive. Before the lab test result can be reported to the company, a medical review officer (MRO) must first contact you to see if your lab test positive was the result of taking a legal medication that has been prescribed to you for a condition that you are currently being treated for by a licensed health care provider. The Flight Attendant will be required to provide proof of a legal prescription within 72 hours of the call from the MRO (i.e. photocopy of bottle or prescription). If the MRO concludes that your lab test positive was the result of a legally prescribed medication, your lab test positive will be verified to the company as a Negative Result. However, the MRO may tell the company that your use of a medication is a safety concern based on her/his judgement. It is up to each employer to decide what action, if any, to take based on the information provided by the MRO. To avoid the risk of being pulled from flying for safety concerns, ask your treating medical provider if there is a medication they can recommend that does not contain amphetamines or opioids.

Please note that there is only one exception to this rule...Marijuana. Marijuana has been legalized for use in some states under certain medical situations. Federal law and policy do not recognize any legitimate medical use of marijuana, a schedule I drug. If you use medically prescribed marijuana, you will still be considered a DOT rule violator. Bottom line - **do not smoke dope.**

In Summary,

- Only use medications for which you have a current and valid prescription and for which you are actively being treated.
- Never exceed the recommended dosage amount or the interval level for taking the medication.
- Make sure the treating medical provider knows about your safety sensitive duties and has approved the use of these medications while performing these duties.
- Don't take medications prescribed for past conditions.

- Never share your medications or borrow medications from others.
- Avoid being pulled from flying by asking your health care provider to find alternatives to medications that contain opioids and or amphetamines.
- Check out the "Medication Safety Film for Flight Attendants" at www.fadap.org