



*Flying for an airline may require either a second or first class medical certificate.*

# The Right Stuff

## *What Kind of Medical Must I Hold?*

BY JAMES WILLIAMS

**Y**ou have probably seen or heard about the kind of “right stuff” physical perfection required of early astronauts and, for that matter, the earliest aviators obliged to obtain a medical certificate. In both cases, the standards were such that many of today’s active airmen might have never passed the exam.

Fortunately, things are different now. The standards recognize that few of us are perfect physical specimens, and they also recognize that the level of certification required for personal recreational flying is different from that needed to command a large passenger airliner. Flexibility is good, but the range of available options can sometimes raise questions. A frequent query in the *FAA Safety Briefing* mailbox is some version of: "I have X condition and so I can only qualify for a third-class medical. Can I still get a flight instructor certificate?" A related area of confusion arises from the medical differences between *holding* a given pilot or instructor certificate and *exercising the privileges* of that certificate. Let's take a look.

### First Things First

To take a practical test for your airline transport pilot (ATP) certificate, you only need a third-class medical. But if you want to exercise the privileges of the ATP certificate, you need to hold a first-class medical certificate. The same concept applies to acquiring a commercial certificate. You don't need more than a third-class medical to take the practical test, but of course you will need a second-class medical if you want to exercise commercial certificate privileges. There are some nuances involved in exercising the privileges of a flight instructor certificate, but we'll come back to that later on.

So what level of medical certificate should you seek? Some experts and organizations advise pilots to seek only the level of medical certification required for the level of privileges they intend to exercise. Even if you have an ATP certificate that you have acquired for personal development, or maybe for insurance reasons, you may not need to hold more than a third-class medical certificate for the kind of flying you actually do (e.g., private pilot privileges).

If you intend to fly professionally, though, it's a good idea to apply at least once for a first- or second-class medical. It makes sense to know up front if you can qualify for that level of medical certificate. Better to discover a problem at the beginning rather than invest (literally) the time and resources needed for commercial or ATP certificates and then learn that you will never be medically qualified to exercise those privileges.

### Who's on Third?

You might think of the third-class medical as the foundational medical certification level and, for most purposes, it is. Unless you are flying as a sport pilot (more on that later), you need at least a third-class medical.



***Being a flight instructor may not require a medical at all, but it might depending on the situation and the student.***

Now let's get back to the question raised at the beginning with respect to exercising the privileges of a flight instructor certificate. We've already established that, assuming you pass the practical test, all you need to earn the flight instructor certificate is a third-class medical. But what if you have a medical condition that limits you to that level of medical certificate? Can you still exercise the privileges of a flight instructor certificate, which is valid only with the individual's commercial pilot certificate?

The short answer is yes. The longer answer has nuances. Let's look at both.

A pilot may exercise the privileges of a flight instructor certificate, act as pilot in command, and/or serve as required pilot flight crew member with no more than a third-class medical certificate. And if the flight instructor is not acting as pilot in command, 14 CFR section 61.23(b)(5) states that he or she does not need a medical at any level. Why the exception, since the flight instructor is presumably being paid? The FAA determined that flight instructors may be paid for their work without at least a second-class medical because they are being paid for their instruction, and not specifically for piloting the aircraft.



**What medical certificate is required to take a practical test?**

A word to the wise, however: Some operators or insurance companies may still require a second-class medical even if the FAA does not. In addition, a flight instructor with anything less than a second-class medical must be mindful of potential regulatory minefields.

“It’s easy to find yourself on the wrong side of that issue,” Aviation Safety Inspector and Airman Training and Certification Branch Manager Jeffrey Smith told us. “Let’s say you’re working for a flight school and they

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pay you to operate an aircraft for something other than flight instruction. Can you do that?” Smith explains that the answer may be no. “Depending on the flight, you’d be conducting a commercial operation that would require a second-class medical.”

Smith continued, “These pop-up requests could create a problem for a CFI with only a third-class medical. If that’s your situation, it’s a good idea to have a talk with your local FSDO to be sure you understand the limitations on your operations with a third-class medical. Your employer might not realize those limitations when he or she asks you to do something, so it’s important for you to be knowledgeable.”

## No Medical, No Problem

So are there things you can do without a medical certificate? Absolutely. As I have just explained, a flight instructor who is not acting as pilot in command can instruct without holding any kind of medical certificate. For instance, you could conduct proficiency training or a flight review for a certificated pilot who is rated in the airplane and current (i.e., current flight review).

There are other activities that do not require a medical. The regulations (14 CFR section 61.23(b)) list several operations not requiring a medical certificate. These include operating a glider or balloon.

As you probably know, a person exercising the privileges of a sport pilot certificate does not require a conventional medical certificate. This function is addressed in 14 CFR section 61.23(c), “operations requiring either a medical certificate or U.S. driver’s license.” This provision outlines the requirements and restrictions a sport pilot must observe when flying on the so-called driver’s license medical. For instance, a pilot using his or her driver’s license must comply with any restrictions placed on that license. And, if the pilot has ever applied for a medical certificate, that pilot must have been found eligible for the issuance of at least a third-class medical certificate at the time of the most recent application. The driver’s license medical provision is similarly unavailable if the pilot’s medical certificate has been suspended or revoked, or if the FAA has withdrawn the most recent special issuance. And, as with any kind of medical certificate, the pilot cannot know or have reason to know of any medical condition that would render him or her unable to safely operate a light sport aircraft.

As you can see just from this short summary, today’s pilots have a great many more medical certification options than our flying forbears enjoyed. Use them; enjoy them; and fly safely! 

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