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Pilots and Mechanics - Watch Out When Self-Medicating Over the Counter Medications, Herbal Remedies, Fitness Supplements

At one point or another, we all feel physically bad. We get sick. We catch a cold, we eat something that disagrees with us, we strain a muscle, we cope with an allergy. It's normal, it's human, and it's real life. For the most part, when we don't feel good, we don't go to work, we don't fly, we don't work with heavy machinery. For many illnesses, it's not necessary to go to the doctor and get a prescription. Still, we do want to feel better, so we take medicine that we can find for ourselves. But, taking some things can have dramatic and unintended consequences in aviation.

Drug store medicines, healing herbs and supplements, and other at-home remedies carry the risk of adversely affecting your faculties and possibly causing a positive test result on a random drug test. By now, we have probably all heard of the sedating effects of the active ingredient in Benadryl, which is an easily accessible over the counter medicine. Heck, we give it to our kids! In the aftermath of aircraft and other transportation accidents, it is cited as being present in many accident reports issued by the National Transportation Safety Board. The NTSB has included ending drug impairment in accidents on its "Most Wanted List".

For over the counter medications, and certainly for prescription medications, it is important to follow the appropriate dosage requirements and to understand the side effects of anything that we put into our bodies, especially if we are going to be flying an airplane or working on an airplane. Just because something is sold over the counter does not mean it's safe. Flying and subjecting ourselves to the rigors of altitude and dehydration can exacerbate the side effects and can lead to unintended cognitive effects. Taking the wrong dosage could lead to other unanticipated symptoms or medical consequences. Furthermore, if we are in a safety sensitive position, we must be cognizant about whether the consumption may subject us to a positive test result on a random drug test that could be conducted when we feel better and return to work. It's important to wait the appropriate period after taking any medicines before getting back to the airplane.

For herbal and other supplements that you may purchase at a health food store or over the internet, caution should be exercised. Supplements are not usually regulated by the government so it may be hard to know exactly what is in them. Pay close attention to the labels on the package and be wary of where the package is coming from. When travelling in areas that permit certain substances to be readily available, such as marijuana in certain states and coca tea leaves in foreign countries, watch carefully over what you consume and be suspicious of consumable gifts that may come from these areas.

We've seen at least one FAA enforcement case that was litigated over a positive drug test result that the airman maintained was unintentionally caused by smoking a cigar bought on the streets in Aruba during vacation. Anecdotally, we've handled cases involving positive drug test results that were believed to have been caused by the unintentional ingestion of marijuana-laced food, the unknowing ingredients in store-bought tea, the inadvertent effects of fitness supplements, and the mistaken use of someone else's medication. It's very difficult to convince the FAA of the facts supporting such explanations after the fact. The FAA more or less views such a defense as a cover up of the actual use, or the FAA views the mistake as one caused by the individual's choice to put themselves in the risky position to cause the result and therefore is responsible for the consequences. It's better to adopt strict practices into your everyday life to prevent the chances of a positive drug test result in the first place.

For pilots, FAR 61.53 prohibits you from acting as a required crewmember with a medical deficiency, and FAR 91.17 specifically prohibits acting as a crewmember while using or under the influence of alcohol or drugs. For those pilots, flight engineers, maintenance personnel, and air traffic controllers who are subject to an FAA drug and alcohol testing program pursuant to FAR Part 120, you are subject to losing your FAA-issued certificates if your pre-employment or random drug test is positive for prohibited substances. For those of use in the aviation industry, there is a lot at stake.