

USA

Falling Asleep in the Cockpit Sign of Health Risks

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The U.S. government agency that regulates civil aviation in the United States, announced new rules this month to combat pilot fatigue. Some fatal crashes have been blamed on mistakes by tired pilots. Flying while fatigued poses a threat to the pilots themselves - not just their passengers.

The Federal Aviation Administration, or FAA, says its new guidelines will make flying safer. The new regulations were issued as a response to the long perceived need to keep pilots from flying when they are exhausted.

"This new rule will afford pilots the opportunity to get eight hours of uninterrupted sleep before a flight," explained Ray Lahood, U.S. Department of Transportation.

The new guidelines, which will go into effect in two years, call for reducing the number of pilots' on-duty hours and giving them a 10-hour rest period between shifts, so they can get at least 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep.

Experts say these changes should have come earlier. Neurologist Aman Savani says brain images show how a lack of sleep impacts the frontal lobes of the brain which are involved with complex tasks like piloting a plane. "There is something called homeostatic pressure that builds up as we are awake, and that pressure becomes almost overwhelming after a certain amount of time, to the extent that there is evidence that the brain catches up on sleep periodically almost unconsciously," Dr. Savani noted. "And so there are periods of micro sleep that occur after certain amount of sleep deprivation."

Dr. Savani says dozing off for those few seconds affects judgment and reaction time, and sleep deprivation carries long term health risks. "Specific risks associated with chronic sleep deprivation includes increased risk for certain types of cancers, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes," he added.

The new rules apply only to pilots of commercial, passenger airlines. The FAA determined that including pilots who fly cargo planes - a large segment of the aviation industry - would add too much to the cost of implementing the changes. But the Independent Pilots Association has filed a lawsuit asking the government to set one level of safety for all pilots.

"We are getting more of our pilots that are just saying I am tired - these flights are just taking a toll on me," said Brian Gaudet, Independent Pilots Association spokesperson. "One of the things that the new rules do is it says you can only fly three consecutive nights overnight and we are currently in situation where pilots fly four - five nights overnight. We would really like to see that that trimmed down," is its spokesperson.

The negative and sometimes deadly effects of sleep deprivation have been seen in other jobs requiring long hours, including truck drivers, doctors, police officers and air traffic controllers.

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