

G A O  
Accountability · Integrity · Reliability

# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-997](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) seeks to make the U.S. aviation system one of the safest in the world. However, a 2005 Department of Transportation Inspector General investigation found that FAA had issued medical certificates to a small percentage of pilots with disqualifying medical conditions, such as heart conditions, schizophrenia, and drug or alcohol addiction.

In response to your request, our report addresses the following questions: (1) what procedures does FAA use to certify that pilot applicants meet medical standards and (2) how does FAA determine that medical certificates have been properly issued? In addressing these objectives, GAO researched FAA guidance and federal regulations; interviewed federal officials; analyzed FAA's application review procedures, quality assurance program, and its use of the National Driver Register; and conducted a data match between FAA's pilot registry and Social Security Administration's disability programs. The data match does not determine if pilots receiving disability benefits have medical conditions that would disqualify them from holding an FAA medical certificate.

GAO is not making recommendations in this report. The Department of Transportation generally agreed with our findings. FAA and the Social Security Administration provided technical clarifications, which we incorporated as appropriate.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-997](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or [flemings@gao.gov](mailto:flemings@gao.gov).

## AVIATION SAFETY

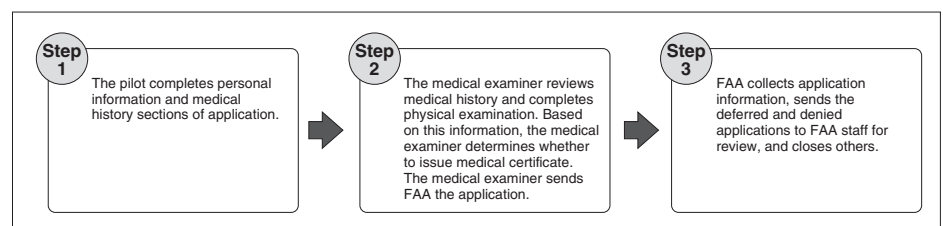
### FAA Has Taken Steps to Determine That It Has Made Correct Medical Certification Decisions

#### What GAO Found

FAA's pilot medical certification procedures consist of a multi-step process intended to determine whether pilots meet medical standards. As part of its certification procedures, aviation medical examiners (AME) review information provided by pilot applicants and the results of their physical examination before issuing medical certificates. In the majority of cases (about 88 percent in 2007), applicants meet medical standards and AMEs issue certificates. FAA uses a computer system to process all the applications. It designates some applications for additional review by FAA application examiners, such as when AMEs do not issue the medical certificate or defer the decision. The computer system also identifies for FAA review the applications in which AMEs issued the medical certificate and the application indicates potentially disqualifying medical conditions. Finally, FAA checks each pilot applicant against the National Driver Register to look for drug- and alcohol-related motor vehicle actions and indications of substance abuse.

FAA has developed programs to help it determine whether it has properly issued medical certificates. Specifically, FAA has established two quality assurance review programs—one evaluating certificates that the AMEs issued and the other evaluating certificate decisions made by FAA application examiners. In its 2007 reviews, FAA identified 19 instances in which AMEs issued certificates to pilots who have disqualifying medical conditions as well as 16 cases in which FAA application examiners overlooked relevant medical documents and 44 with clerical errors. According to FAA officials, they plan to continue reviewing AME-issued certificates and collecting the results. These additional data from subsequent years could help FAA identify how well its procedures are ensuring that medical certificates are being properly issued. In addition, FAA relies on the National Driver Register check to help ensure pilots meet medical standards. Finally, due to recently resolved litigation, FAA currently does not check federal disability benefits databases for indications that pilots may have disqualifying medical conditions. Although our analysis of the Social Security Administration's disability databases found that 1,246 of 394,985 medically certified pilots were receiving disability benefits, this does not necessarily mean these pilots do not meet FAA medical standards. It may, however, indicate that federal disability databases can provide useful information on potentially disqualifying medical conditions.

#### Overview of FAA's Medical Certification Application Process



Source: GAO analysis based on FAA information.