Major Changes to the FAA Mental Health, Cardiac, and Vision Policies

On May 29, 2024, the FAA released an update to their "Guide for Aviation Medical Examiners" that includes significant changes to the Agency's protocols for certain mental health, coronary heart disease, and ophthalmologic conditions. Many of these changes come as a result of the recommendations contained within the Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances Aviation Rulemaking Committee's (ARC) report issued on March 30, 2024.

Some of the most significant changes can be found within the updated policy regarding "uncomplicated" anxiety, depression and related conditions. In a major shift from the current process, individuals with certain diagnoses who have been, or are currently being, treated with psychotherapy, have not been medicated within the previous two years, and meet screening criteria for risk factors can now be approved for a medical clearance by their Aviation Medical Examiner (AME). Previously, such cases would be deferred for review by the Office of Aviation Medicine in order to obtain a medical clearance under Special Consideration.

To be eligible under this new approach, an individual can have a history of up to two of the following diagnoses:

- *Anxiety:*
  - Generalized anxiety disorder
  - Situational anxiety (aka adjustment disorder with anxiety)
  - Social anxiety disorder
  - Unspecified anxiety

- *Depression:*
  - Postpartum depression
  - Situational depression (aka adjustment disorder with depressed mood)
  - Situational anxiety and depression (adjustment disorder with mixed anxiety and depressed mood)
  - Unspecified depression

- *Other:*

- Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- V code^ (DSM)/Z code (ICD-10) table items

This new process is designed to streamline the approval for many of the "simplest" conditions. Individuals who do not meet the new criteria, such as those undergoing treatment with current medication, are still potentially eligible for Special Consideration authorizations with a more thorough evaluation by the FAA.

On a related note, the FAA has now approved Duloxetine (Cymbalta), Venlafaxine (Effexor), and Desvenlafaxine (Pristiq) for use under its Antidepressant Protocol. This process was previously referred to as the SSRI protocol and allows for a medical clearance with Special Consideration to be issued on a case-by-case basis when an individual demonstrates that they have been stable with no symptoms or side effects and on the same dose of certain medications for 6 months. Prior approved medications are Fluoxetine (Prozac), Sertraline (Zoloft), Citalopram (Celexa), Escitalopram (Lexapro), and Bupropion (Wellbutrin).

Additionally, the FAA has adopted a revised process for individuals with coronary heart disease/coronary artery disease in order to reduce the time and expenses associated with the annual recertification process. This new process will allow an AME to issue a medical clearance with Special Consideration to those individuals who obtain reports from their treating cardiologist that the individual's condition has remained stable and that there are no significant medical concerns, without requiring any further stress tests. Stress tests will still be required, however, for obtaining an individual's first instance of a medical clearance with Special Consideration for coronary heart disease/coronary artery disease.

Finally, the FAA has also established new protocols to address lattice degeneration, a condition of the eye's retina that affects 1 in 10 individuals, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology. The FAA has announced that individuals who otherwise meet the vision standards for the class sought and have no complicating symptoms can receive their medical clearance from their AME. As always, those with more complicated cases may still be eligible under a special consideration.

According to the Office of Aviation Medicine, these changes represent just the initial steps in updating many of their processes and policies.

Visit our Website