

# FC5332

*Posted on 15.04.2024 by Steve Forward*

**Category:** [Flight Crew \(Commercial\)](#)

**Report Title** Fitness to fly

## Initial Report

In recent months I have had to offload crew members on 3 occasions due to being unfit to fly, both pilots and cabin crew. On all occasions it was due to cold symptoms, which whilst weren't that obvious at report time, manifested themselves throughout the subsequent sectors leading to an offload part way through the day. There are 3 issues I feel need addressing;

- 1. Commanders responsibility for crew members fitness to fly.** Assessing a crew members fitness is subjective, as a cold can vary in severity and can be hidden well during the briefing. Asking the crew member if they are fit will inevitably lead to a 'yes' – and as captains are not doctors it is difficult to make a judgement. We need clear guidance from the Company that the Commander's decision will be final and non-punitive to both parties.
- 2. Perceived pressures from the Company.** While the Company says it has a sickness policy and crew will be paid, cabin crew in particular will not receive sector pay or commission if they are sick – and this was quoted to me as a reason for not calling sick for the duty as 'they didn't have many hours that month as it was and couldn't afford it'. There is also the threat of an interrogation from management depending on the individuals sickness record. The Commander is then under considerable pressure and may have to argue with a crew who may consider themselves fit even when they are clearly not – but as before this is subjective.
- 3. Inadequate education of crew on the risks of flying while unfit.** In the case of the pilot offload, he was unaware that flying with blocked ears could have serious consequences when it comes to burst eardrums etc. I feel that time should be spent during initial training/induction establishing the company culture re sickness and how various ailments that might be mild on the ground can be very different in the air.

The Company often stays quiet on such matters as they obviously don't want to 'encourage' sickness, but I have seen a definite trend of crew reporting when unfit and offloads during the duty, which creates additional problems.

## Comment

Although fitness to operate is a personal obligation, as the ultimate arbiter for the safety of the flight, *CHIRP* feels that captains clearly have an operational and moral responsibility as the final barrier not just for the safety of the operation but also to save people from themselves or deal with situations when they don't realise they are unfit to operate – ultimately, peoples' fitness to operate has relevance not only to the flight's safety if they can't conduct their duties but also for their personal safety and well-being. That being said, captains offloading crew members if they suspect they are unfit to fly must be done circumspectly given that captains are not specifically qualified to make such decisions for others. If someone is clearly not functioning well enough then that's one thing, but if someone is just a bit 'under the weather' or has a minor ailment that they are happy to continue with but the captain is not, there is potential for all sorts of disputes about medical judgements. In this respect, it's important that captains are supported by medical help and guidance. There are various third-party medical services that airlines subscribe to depending on their chosen provider, and these are important sources of professional assistance in supporting the decisions made by captains so that they don't have to shoulder the burden themselves when things may not be clear-cut.

Aeromedical physiology is an element of pilot education and licencing so we're genuinely surprised that a pilot would not know about the risks of flying with a cold. Cabin Crew are not licenced and their aeromedical training varies from company to company but, although they might perhaps not have the same level of knowledge, they should also be well aware of the risks of flying with colds etc. A minor snuffle might not be a significant risk, but operating with a heavy cold would of course not be a good idea. Ultimately, we acknowledge that there are huge financial and perceived adverse company policy pressures on crews to fly if they are unfit and so third-party oversight from captains is appropriate in applicable circumstances and must be supported by the companies.



