

The Silent Threat at 35,000 Feet

Pilot Health, Blood Clots, and the Cost of Ignoring Our Bodies

By a Fellow Pilot

Three years ago, I slipped while walking up icy stairs to the airplane. At the time, I didn't think much of it other than assuming I may have pulled my hamstring. Like many pilots, I figured I'd probably just be sore later on and kept moving.

The soreness came — but not in the way I expected.

The following day, while getting dressed for another day of flying, I noticed my calf was swollen. My leg hurt from the knee down, and it became painful to walk. Still, I wasn't immediately concerned. I convinced myself it was simply related to the fall the day before.

So I pressed on.

For the next week, I continued flying while dealing with the discomfort and swelling. I started taking ibuprofen a couple times a day for the pain and tried to work through it.

Ten days later, after finally returning home, I decided to stop by my doctor's office and mention what had been going on with my leg. Thankfully, there was a specialist there who performed a scan immediately.

A few moments later, the doctor walked into the room and said words I will never forget:

"You have a blood clot behind your knee. You need to go to the emergency room right away."

I called my mother, told her what the doctor had said, and drove straight to the ER.

At the hospital, additional scans confirmed the clot in my leg. But the news got worse.

They also discovered blood clots in my lungs.

The shock, fear, and sadness that came over me in that moment were overwhelming. What I believed was something I was "tough enough" to push through had become a life-threatening medical emergency.

Something I minimized nearly took my life permanently.

What followed was a long and difficult road back. I was out of commission for ten months. Ten months away from the career I loved. Ten months away from the cockpit, my routine, and the friendships and purpose aviation had given me over the years.

That experience changed my perspective completely.

As pilots, we train extensively for emergencies. Engine failures. Cargo fires. Rapid decompression. Hydraulic failures. We prepare for the unexpected every day.

But one of the most dangerous threats we face often goes unspoken: our own health.

Blood clots do not care how experienced you are. They do not care how many hours you have logged, how professional you are, or how badly the flight needs to go.

And unfortunately, many of the conditions surrounding our profession quietly increase the risk:

- long periods of sitting
- dehydration
- fatigue
- circadian disruption
- stress
- poor sleep
- inconsistent eating habits

Many of us normalize swollen legs, exhaustion, aches, and discomfort because it becomes “part of the job.”

But our bodies keep score.

Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT) occurs when a clot forms, typically in the lower leg. If that clot breaks free and travels to the lungs, it can become a Pulmonary Embolism (PE) — a potentially fatal condition.

Looking back now, I realize how easily I dismissed the warning signs: swelling, pain, difficulty walking, and persistent discomfort.

I kept telling myself I'd be fine.

That mindset nearly cost me everything.

The aviation community has made tremendous progress discussing fatigue, CRM, and mental health. Physical health deserves the same level of attention. Too many pilots ignore symptoms because they fear losing flying time, losing income, or appearing weak.

But taking care of your health is not weakness.

It is professionalism.

A healthy pilot is a safer pilot.

Hydrate. Move around when operationally appropriate. Stretch. Exercise. Take unusual pain or swelling seriously. Pay attention to your body, especially after long periods of sitting or injury.

Most importantly, do not convince yourself to “just push through” symptoms that may require medical attention.

No trip is worth your life.

Being away from aviation for those ten months taught me something I will carry forever:

Life is short. Much shorter than we sometimes allow ourselves to believe. And sometimes the simplest thing — something you barely think twice about — can change everything in an instant.

We spend our careers protecting the people behind the cockpit door.

We have to remember to protect ourselves too.

Pilot Health Reminders

- Stay hydrated throughout the duty day
- Limit excessive caffeine and energy drink reliance
- Move and stretch regularly during long flights
- Take leg pain or swelling seriously
- Prioritize sleep and recovery
- Exercise consistently, even in small amounts
- Seek medical evaluation for concerning symptoms early

“Fitness for duty is more than showing up legally rested. It means showing up healthy enough to continue doing the job safely for years to come.”