

Aviation Drug Testing Rules in India: Air India Pilot Case and DGCA Regulations

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Aviation Drug Testing Rules in India Latest News

- A second drug test of the pilot-in-command of the Air India Phuket-Delhi flight, which suffered a sudden 300-feet altitude loss injuring 24 people, has confirmed “positive for marijuana.”
- The incident brings renewed attention to **India’s drug testing protocol** for aviation personnel, laid down by the **Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA)**.

The Incident

- The Airbus A320 flight was initially thought to have hit severe turbulence, but sources suggest the aircraft may also have faced snags in its hydraulic and control systems just before the incident.
- The **Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB)** is currently investigating. Following standard procedure after any safety-related incident, the pilot-in-command was tested for drugs — the screening test came back “non-negative,” and the confirmatory test has now returned positive for marijuana.

India's Drug Testing Framework for Aviation

- The DGCA's Civil Aviation Requirement (CAR) on drug testing was released in September 2021 and came into effect on January 31, 2022.
- While **pilots and air traffic controllers** are the **primary focus**, the rules also cover other safety-sensitive aviation personnel — aircraft maintenance engineers, certifying staff, trainee pilots, instructors and examiners.
- Only **flight crew** and **air traffic controllers** face a **mandatory 10% annual random testing** requirement.
- Other personnel are tested at the time of hiring or after specific incidents.
- Testing is also conducted after **any safety-related event**, as happened in this case. Airlines and organisations such as flying schools and maintenance providers are encouraged to extend random testing further across their workforce.
- Urine samples are tested for six categories of psychoactive substances: amphetamines and amphetamine-type stimulants, opiates and metabolites, cannabis (tetrahydrocannabinol), cocaine, barbiturates, and benzodiazepines.

How the Testing Process Works

- The collected urine sample is split into two containers. The sample in the first container undergoes an immediate screening test.
- If this result is “non-negative” — indicating possible presence of a psychoactive substance — the individual is instantly **removed from flying duty** pending confirmation.
- The second sample is then sent to a designated laboratory for confirmatory testing, using high-precision techniques like gas chromatography/mass spectrometry (GC/MS) or liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC-MS).
- If the confirmatory test is positive, the organisation's medical in-charge consults a Medical Review Officer (MRO) to check whether the result stemmed from legitimate medical treatment — for instance, certain pain-relief medicines containing codeine can trigger a false positive for opiates — rather than actual substance abuse.

Escalating Consequences for Confirmed Drug Use

- Once the MRO confirms genuine drug use, a graded disciplinary ladder applies:
 - **First offence:** The employee is referred to a specialist doctor, counsellor, or de-addiction centre for rehabilitation. Return to duty requires a fresh negative test and a fitness certificate from the organisation's medical in-charge.
 - **Second offence (after returning to duty):** The licence is suspended for three years.
 - **Third offence:** The licence is permanently cancelled.

Refusal to Test Treated as Seriously as a Positive Result

- The DGCA treats refusal to undergo testing on par with a positive result.

- On first refusal, the employee is taken off duty and must clear a test within 48 hours; failure leads to a one-year licence suspension along with mandatory rehabilitation.
- A second refusal, or testing positive after an earlier refusal, results in a three-year suspension, with any further violation leading to licence cancellation.

Conclusion

- This incident underscores why India's structured drug testing regime — from mandatory random checks to graded penalties — is vital for aviation safety.
- As substance abuse concerns grow globally, strict enforcement of such protocols remains essential to safeguard passengers and crew alike.

Source: IE

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