

# Personal Minimums How Old Is Too Old?

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**A**ge and age-related health issues are tough topics for most pilots. Up to a point, we can mostly (even if reluctantly) accept that a few more wrinkles bespeak a lot more experience and confidence in the cockpit. But, just as there are limits on how much lift a wing can develop before it reaches the critical angle of attack, there are also limits on how long a pilot can perform before experiencing indicators of age-related “stall buffet.”

Be honest: When you have mental lapses while in pursuit of your aviation dreams, do you quickly think of an excuse to get you off the hook? Have you known you might be slipping a little and just refused to accept that some of your senses might be slowing down? It's a tough truth to take.

### Physiological “Stall Buffet”

Even tougher is the question of what to do about it. Unlike a wing, which stalls abruptly when the critical angle of attack is exceeded, the aging human body often “stalls” in a more subtle and more gradual way. The exam we periodically get from the aviation medical examiner (AME) is primarily a snapshot. Except for some sudden disqualifying medical event, such as a heart attack, few pilots go from “medically sound and safe” to “unfit and unsafe” overnight. So, how do we know how long is too long?

For those who are reasonably honest and self-aware, there are certainly indicators along the way. Almost every day, I meet pilots who have already stopped trying to stay current, stopped renewing their certificated flight instructor (CFI) certificates, stopped practicing, or even stopped getting medical certificates renewed. Some know, at least at some level, that they have begun to have trouble in flying, navigation, take-offs and landings, or maybe radio communications. But they still want to be pilots, pilots who fly enough to maintain their airport “hangar rat” credentials.

### Recognize and Recover

From the earliest stages of training, pilots learn to recognize and correctly recover from the first indications of an aerodynamic stall. As we grow older, being pilot in command demands that we also learn to recognize and deal with the indications of a “physiological stall.” Just as we rely on instructors to help

us learn about aerodynamic stalls, sometimes it takes another set of eyes, such as a trusted co-pilot or a qualified instructor, to help us recognize the physiological signs we'd rather not acknowledge on our own. I sometimes hear pilots who are friends or clients relating stories of things that happened or mistakes they made on their last flight. It's scary.

I consider it part of my responsibility, both as a friend and a flight instructor, to provide honest feedback. When, for example, you sense that you are slowing down, it goes without saying that you need to work as hard as you can at staying healthy through diet, exercise, and regular check-up visits with your physician. Another recognize-and-recover step you can take is to do things more slowly. You could step back to a slower airplane, reduce the number of long and tiring trips you take in the airplane, and consider flying only in daylight.

There are also cases where honest feedback means that it's time to consider alternatives to flying solo. These alternatives need not be painful. In fact, I'll bet that most of us find flying to be more fun anyway when it's shared with our aviation friends. I'm also willing to bet that you can find an older flight instructor at your airport who would just love to go flying with you on a regular basis (and possibly at a reduced rate). I know this is true at my airport, because I gladly do it almost daily.

Most of all, be honest with yourself and do whatever it takes to avoid having an accident or an incident at any age.

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##### Pilot Age and Performance: An Annotated Bibliography (1990-1999)

[http://www.faa.gov/library/reports/medical/age60/media/age60\\_1.pdf](http://www.faa.gov/library/reports/medical/age60/media/age60_1.pdf)

##### Pilot Age and Accident Rates Report 4: An Analysis of Professional ATP and Commercial Pilot Accident Rates by Age

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