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Incidents of pilots flying while drunk rare, but not unprecedented

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ROBERT ZUCKERMAN/PARAMOUNT PICTURES/FILE

Denzel Washington starred in the 2012 film “Flight,” which featured a pilot dealing with addiction.

By Matt Rocheleau

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A 50-year-old American Airlines co-pilot was charged Monday with being drunk before a scheduled

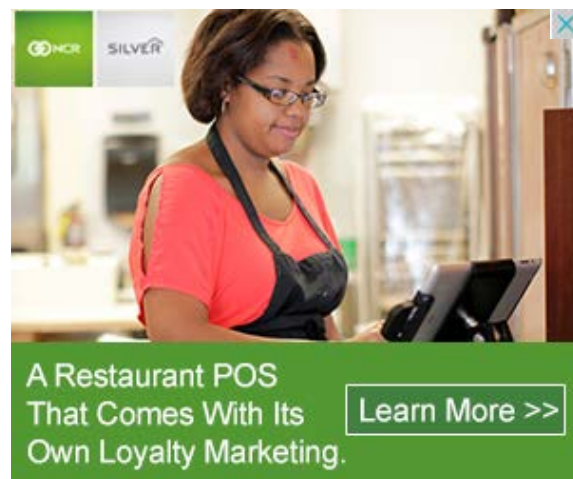
flight, raising a disturbing question for the flying public: How many pilots are stepping into the cockpit drunk?

Such a scenario is not unprecedented. Each year on average, there are about 11 cases in which airplane pilots are found with more alcohol in their system than rules allow, according to more than a decade's worth of data from the Federal Aviation Administration.

But overall, such cases are exceedingly rare.

Between 2003 and 2015, some 155,615 blood-alcohol tests were administered to pilots nationwide. Only 147 of those tests — or 0.09 percent — showed a blood alcohol content above the allowable limit for pilots.

What's more, the legal limit for pilots is a BAC of 0.04 percent, or half of the legal limit of 0.08 percent for drivers.



Pilot charged with being drunk before flight

The 50-year-old American Airlines co-pilot was detained and held from a scheduled flight from Detroit to Philadelphia that was cancelled.

FAA officials said the agency takes swift, decisive action when pilots violate alcohol and drug regulations. Punishment can include suspending or revoking licenses that pilots need to fly, officials said.

About 96 percent of the testing the agency does are random screenings.

The rest of the tests are administered as part of the pre-employment process, after an accident, because of reasonable suspicion, as a follow-up to prior testing, or because a pilot is returning to duty following successful rehabilitation, officials said.

Pilots rarely fail alcohol screenings

The legal limit for pilots is a BAC of 0.04 percent, or half of the legal limit of 0.08 percent for drivers.

Year	Pilot blood-alcohol violations	Tests
2003	16	10,814
2004	7	11,488
2005	13	11,151
2006	14	11,339
2007	9	12,089
2008	13	12,472
2009	11	12,592
2010	10	12,354
2011	12	11,958
2012	14	12,003
2013	5	12,477
2014	13	11,729
2015	10	13,149

SOURCE: Federal Aviation Administration

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