



UK Civil Aviation Authority

Flying in General Aviation aircraft

Introduction

Have you been gifted a flight experience? Or perhaps a family member or friend has offered to take you as a passenger in their light aircraft?

Before you fly, it's important to understand that General Aviation (GA) flights are different from commercial airline travel. They can be exciting, scenic, and highly personal experiences, but they are also more sensitive to weather and aircraft limitations.

General Aviation in the UK covers non-commercial civil aviation operations, including recreational and training flights in light aeroplanes, helicopters, balloons and gliders. Find out more on our [General Aviation webpages](#).



This leaflet is designed to help you understand what to expect from your flight and to feel informed before making a decision to fly.

What to expect in a ‘General Aviation’ flight:

- > Small aircraft, typically with 2–6 seats.
- > Usually flown by licensed recreational pilots rather than airline crews.
- > Flights may be recreational, training, or for personal travel.
- > Weather and operating conditions can affect GA aircraft more than commercial aircraft.



Understanding the nature of GA Flights





More sensitivity to weather

GA aircraft are lighter and smaller, so wind, turbulence, rain, and temperature changes have a much greater impact than on large commercial aircraft.



Lower flying altitudes

GA flights usually operate at lower altitudes than commercial aircraft, where weather is more changeable - cloud, poor visibility, turbulence, and precipitation are more common, and therefore flights may be delayed, rerouted or cancelled if the weather changes.



Different regulations than airlines

GA is regulated by the CAA and is considered safe for members of the public to participate in - but the rules and operating environment are different from flying in an airliner.



Aircraft size and comfort

Smaller aircraft can feel more turbulence, are noisier, and can experience more vibration than an airliner.



Pilot experience

All GA pilots must meet statutory licensing standards, but experience levels may differ to those of commercial airline pilots. The pilot in command of any aircraft has responsibility for the safety of those onboard – you can read more in our [Care of Passengers Safety Sense Leaflet](#).



Difference in aerodromes

GA aerodromes are quite different! Many are small operations without large terminals unlike what you may experience when going on holiday. They can often have smaller grass runways which may not be as smooth as those at a larger airport.

Remember: You are always free to decline or stop the flight at any point before take-off. If you feel unwell during the flight, speak to the pilot who can end the flight early.

Types of flight

General Aviation (GA) covers a wide range of flying activities, including:

- > **Recreational flights** – for example, flying with a friend or family member who is a pilot.
- > **Cost-sharing flights** – where you contribute proportionately to the cost of the flight (such as fuel or aircraft hire).
- > **Pleasure flights** – such as scenic trips over a city or local landmarks. These are operated by organisations holding an Air Operator Certificate (AOC).
- > **Introductory flights** – short flights typically offered by local flying clubs or training organisations.
- > **Air experience flights** – instructional flights (sometimes referred to as trial lessons) delivered by a qualified Flight Instructor, usually through a flying club or training organisation to give you an insight into learning to fly.
- > **Charity flights** – flights offered as prizes in raffles, auctions, or other fundraising competitions.
- > **Flights in historic or high-performance aircraft** – operators are usually required to obtain your written acknowledgement and consent before participation. More information is available on the UK CAA website: [Safety standards acknowledgement and consent](#).



You should understand the basis on which the flight is offered – if in doubt confirm with the operator or pilot concerned.

If a payment is made for the flight to take place, additional requirements on the pilot and operator normally apply above that for a private flight piloted by a friend or family member.

Introductory or air experience flights provided by flying club or training organisation must comply with certain additional requirements. Air experience flights (trial lessons) must be conducted by a qualified flight instructor.

If making a financial contribution to a private flight, known as ‘cost sharing’, this should be no more than a proportionate share of the cost such that the flight remains ‘non-commercial’.

If you suspect an organisation or individual is not complying with the relevant requirements, you may report this to the CAA via the [‘whistleblowing’ process](#).

More information regarding the regulations for introductory flights, cost sharing or reporting concerns about an operator is available by searching the [CAA website](#).



Risks

As with any recreational activity, flying does come with risks. While air accidents are concerning, they are rare, and pilots are trained to deal with incidents such as engine failures and other emergencies as part of gaining their licence.

Pilots and operators of aircraft are expected to identify and manage risks specific to the nature and location of their operation; feel free to ask them questions about this before your flight.



In 2025, 13 people were fatally injured, and 14 seriously injured in GA accidents out of 528,871* reported hours flown.

* According to UK Aircraft Register as on 14th April 2026.



On average, GA accidents each year lead to about 11 fatalities and 14 serious injuries. This represents roughly 2-3 accidents in which a fatality or serious injury occurred for every 100,000 reported flight hours.

In comparison, according to the UK CAA [Annual Safety Review 2024](#), the scheduled commercial air transport sector carried over 128 million passengers on more than 880,000 flights. In 2024, there were 4 accidents and 18 serious incidents; three of these accidents resulted in serious injuries.



Are you fit to fly?

Just as qualified pilots assess their own fitness before every flight, you too should consider whether you're fit to fly so that you can get the most out of the flight. If you have any concerns, speak to the pilot or operator and seek medical advice as required.

If you do not feel well enough on the day of the flight, it is normally possible to rearrange.



Illness

Some long term medical conditions, as well as colds, flu and sinus infections can make pressure changes during flight uncomfortable, especially for the ears. If you cannot equalise your ear pressure easily on the ground, it is best to postpone your flight to avoid pain or injury.



Medication

Both prescription and over the counter medicine may carry a risk of side effects such as drowsiness, which may become more severe on a flight. Seek advice from a GP or Pharmacist if in doubt.



Psychoactive substances

These can impair judgement, coordination, reaction time and spatial awareness, all of which may affect your ability to react and to understand and follow safety instructions promptly. Effects may persist for some time after use, without you being aware.



Stress

Stress can reduce situational awareness and enjoyment. Where possible, allow time to relax before your flight.



Alcohol

Avoid alcohol before flying in a light aircraft. It can significantly impair judgement, coordination and reaction time. You should not have consumed alcohol within at least 8 hours before your flight, and longer if you have had significant quantities.



Fatigue

Feeling tired can affect concentration and performance whilst flying, so ensure you've had sufficient sleep the night before.



Eating

Avoid heavy meals and ensure you're well hydrated – this can help you feel comfortable and reduce the risk of motion sickness. Flying on an empty stomach is not recommended either – a light and healthy meal several hours before the flight is the best approach.



Clothing

Wear comfortable, weather-appropriate clothing and flat, closed-toe shoes. Avoid loose items that could interfere with aircraft controls and secure personal belongings before the flight.



Being under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs such that you are impaired whilst on a flight could constitute a criminal offence.



Questions you may have before your flight

Your pilot or appointed ground staff should give you a safety briefing before you fly. This normally covers what to do in an emergency such as opening emergency exits, operation of seat belts, and adopting a brace position. They should also outline the route and plan for the flight.

Ensure you understand the safety briefing and ask any questions you may have. For example:

- > What noises or sensations should I expect?
- > Who else will be onboard the flight?
- > How do I talk to you during the flight, and when is a good time for questions?
- > What's the plan for the route, altitude, and expected duration?
- > How does the weather look along the route and at the destination?
- > What are our options if conditions change (e.g., turn back, divert a Plan B)?
- > What licenses or ratings do you hold and are they valid?
- > Are you comfortable with today's aircraft and conditions?
- > What are the risks you have considered ahead of today's flight?
- > When was the aircraft last inspected or maintained, and does the aircraft insurance cover all occupants?
- > On what basis is the flight offered, for example is it an Air experience flight or an introductory flight, and what is different between them?
- > What safety equipment is on board (e.g., life jackets, emergency locator beacon, first aid, CO Dectector, fire extinguisher)?

Things to consider during the flight

- > There will be times when you won't be able to speak to the pilot, for example take-off and landing, or when they are talking to air traffic control over the radio.
- > Let the pilot know if you feel unwell or uneasy.
- > You can help by keeping an eye out for other aircraft and letting the pilot know – don't assume they've seen it!
- > Remember to enjoy it and have fun!

