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How to Get Your Private Helicopter Pilot's Certificate (aka License)

Summary

There are 4 basic steps you need to complete in order to get your Private Pilot's License to fly helicopters in the United States.

1. Class III Medical Certificate
2. Minimum of 40 Hours Helicopter Flying
3. Complete the FAA Private Pilot Written Examination
4. Oral Exam and Check Ride with FAA Examiner or FAA Designated Examiner

Once you pass your Oral Exam and Check Ride, the Examiner will issue you a temporary certification so you can start flying. Sorry kids, you've got to be at least 17 years old to get a pilot's license.

Introduction

It all seems pretty easy doesn't it? Just 4 simple steps until you can go out and live the dream - flying free with the birds and the clouds! Well hold on now, it's not a cakewalk and you'll work pretty hard to get that private helicopter pilot's certificate, but we think it's all worth it in the end. We're going to explain to you in pretty much detail what it realistically takes for you to fulfill your dream. There are several other documents we will reference here to give you more details on helicopter ground school and helicopter flight school. For now, let's focus on the overview of how you can become a licensed private helicopter pilot.

By way of explanation, you might have heard it called a helicopter pilot's license and you might have heard it called a helicopter pilot's certificate. Well, officially on the document you receive from the Federal Aviation Administration it is called a Pilot's Certificate. However, the term 'pilot's license' is used overwhelmingly by the general public versus the term 'pilot's certificate'. Don't worry about it, they are both the same thing. We use the two terms interchangeably throughout this document.

Types of Helicopter Pilot's Licenses and Certificates

If you are already familiar with the different ratings and licenses you can get to fly a helicopter, you can skip this section. For those of you who want to know more keep reading. There are 7 different types of helicopter pilot's license or certification you can get:

1. Helicopter Student's Certificate
2. Private Helicopter Pilot's Certificate (or License)
3. Commercial Helicopter Pilot's Certificate
4. Certified Flight Instructor (CFI) Certificate
5. Certified Flight Instructor - Instrument (CFII) Certificate
6. Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) Certificate
7. Instrument Certification



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The Helicopter Student's Certificate is the entry level for flying and it's where everyone starts. Interestingly enough, you don't actually have to get your Student Certificate to start flying with a Certified Flight Instructor. You only have to get it before you fly your first solo. It's probably not a good idea to wait that long before you obtain your Helicopter Student's Certificate, but we'll discuss the reasons for that in a future post.

Once you have completed all the requirements and obtained your Private Helicopter Pilot's license you can fly a helicopter during the day or the night under favorable weather conditions. You are allowed to have passengers in the helicopter with you (with certain restrictions, more on that at a future time), but they cannot be paying you to perform any services for them, such as transportation, sightseeing, line inspections, etc. You can fly anywhere in the United States in approved flying corridors. Essentially it's a lot like having a private automobile driver's license, you can cart yourself and your friends around to the places you want to go, but that's about it.

The next level up from the Private Helicopter Pilot's License is the Commercial Helicopter Pilot's Certificate. With certificate you can actually work for yourself or someone else and get paid to

- transport a limited number of passengers
- give helicopter rides
- perform aerial inspections
- spray for crop dusting

Some of these things require additional endorsements on the Commercial Helicopter Pilot's Certificate before you can actually perform the duties (another future article).

With a Commercial Helicopter Pilot's Certificate you can fly at day or night, but only in favorable weather conditions. Just like with the Private Helicopter Pilot's License you can fly anywhere in the U.S. where there are not restricted flying zones. There are restrictions on the number of passengers you are allowed to carry and the type of helicopters you are allowed to fly.

Taking your helicopter flying career one step further, you can teach others to fly helicopters as a Certified Flight Instructor (CFI). You still aren't qualified to fly in weather conditions that require instruments, but you are qualified to teach at a helicopter flying school. This allows you to teach others the joy of flying a helicopter just like you learned to.

Getting certified to fly on instruments extends the capabilities of whichever license you have. You can become instrument certified with a Private Helicopter Pilot's License or a Commercial Helicopter Pilot's Certificate. With your Instrument Certification you are allowed to fly in cloudy and adverse weather conditions.

Taking your CFI to the next level, you can get instrument certified as an instructor, with a CFII certification, or Certified Flight Instructor – Instrument. This allows you to teach others with a valid pilot's license to learn flying on instruments.



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If you don't want to be an instructor, you can take your license in another direction and become an Airline Transport Pilot, or ATP. This is the type of license that allows you to fly commercial airliners or large passenger transport helicopters and such. In addition to allowing you to pilot large transport helicopters, the ATP in the helicopter world is viewed as the pinnacle of success, or the Masters of the pilot certificates. The ATP rating requires a highly skilled and proficient pilot that performs at a very high standard. Although a student will not qualify for this right out of school, this is something that many pilots try to achieve by obtaining experience then coming back for.

Helicopter Flying Schools

There are 2 FAA exams you are required to pass to get your Helicopter Pilot's License, 1) the written exam and 2) the oral exam with check flight. Since there are 2 tests, most people attend 2 different schools to prepare for the exams:

1. Helicopter Ground School
2. Helicopter Flight School

You could prepare for the written exam through self-study, but you will not get the same experience as interacting with other students and an experienced instructor that can tie all the pieces together for you. And as with anything dealing with your preparation to fly helicopters, we cannot stress the **importance of safety** enough. You are taking your life and the lives of others into your hands so don't take shortcuts when it comes to learning the right way. Your preparation for the oral exam and check ride (the flying part of the testing) requires that you get a minimum of 40 helicopter flight hours before taking the exam. Some of the 40 hours will be with your CFI and some will be solo. This is similar to having your automobile driver's permit that allows you to learn driving a car as long as you are with a qualified licensed driver. Only this time you need to be flying with someone that the FAA says is qualified for you to fly with, i.e. your flight instructor.

And by the way, that 40 hour minimum is probably not a realistic number; you will likely need more hours than that to really get prepared for the check flight. Everyone is different, and maybe you are an exception to the rule, but most people actually need 60-65 hours of flying time to be truly ready. Your flight instructor has to be convinced you are ready or they will not allow you to go for your check flight.

Most reputable Helicopter Flying schools will offer both the Ground School and the Flight School. As long as they are approved by the FAA as a flying school you can prepare for your license at that school. There is a very important distinction to make between the different schools though. Schools are either FAA Part 141 certified, or they are not. Schools that are not Part 141 certified can still prepare you for your license exams, but they do not have the same stringent learning requirements as a Part 141 school. This is similar to attending a college that is accredited versus a non-accredited college. You'll get a degree from either one, but your skill level is most likely going to be at a higher level with the degree from the accredited school (plus employers notice these things too). See the Helicopter Ground School Curriculum Outline and Helicopter Flight School Curriculum Outline to get a better understanding of the requirements for a Part 141 qualified flying school.



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A typical, well qualified Helicopter Ground School program is going to take about 12-15 weeks to complete. To get through a program like this in 12-15 weeks, plan on spending about 3 hours in a classroom twice a week. In addition to the classroom time, you should anticipate another 6-10 hours per week for studying. During the course of the program, you will probably take a series of practice exams to help you prepare for the FAA Written Exam.

You can actually attend Helicopter Flight School and start doing your practice flying at the same time you are attending Ground School. You should probably delay starting Flight School by a week or two after you start Ground School just to give yourself time to learn the basics of helicopter flying. With most Helicopter Flying Schools, the flying part of the program is pretty flexible. In the Ground School setting you will probably be attending classes with other students. When you do your practice flying it will be just you and your Flight Instructor. You will schedule your flying time with your instructor whenever you can both make it, weather permitting. Plan on trying to fly about 3 hours per week. Check with your flying school to see how flexible their flying hours are. Some of your practice will be at night, but mostly you will be flying during daylight hours, so some weekends are going to be inevitable for most people. If you could actually get in 3 hours of flying every week, and assuming you start flying 1 week after Ground School begins, you could accumulate almost 40 hours of flying by the time you complete 14 weeks of Ground School. This is probably not realistic for most people since they won't actually be able to dedicate that amount of time to flying, so plan accordingly. You and your Flight Instructor should be able to make a pretty good assessment of your flying skills and make a joint determination of how many more flight hours you will need to be ready to ace your FAA check flight. You're getting close!

Class III Medical Clearance

Your Class III Medical exam is required before you can take your FAA check flight. The exam is valid for between 2 and 5 years depending on your age so it is probably a good idea to get the clearance before you spend a lot of money on learning to fly just to find out your health won't allow it. If you are in reasonably good health, don't have any substance abuse issues and you are not mentally unstable you will most probably not have a problem getting your clearance. You have to go to a physician that is qualified as an Aviation Medical Examiner (AME) for the exam. Assuming you pass, they will give you clearance to fly as a **student** pilot. Expert Tip – be honest with your examiner! A lot of conditions are perfectly acceptable for flying under the FAA regulations. By withholding information, you could cause more headaches than it's worth in the long run!

Legitimate Helicopter Flying schools are not allowed to give you recommendations for a medical examiner, but they may be able to provide you with a list of qualified examiners in your area.

The Written Exam

The FAA written exam portion of getting your Private Helicopter Pilot's License is pretty grueling. It consists of approximately 50 questions and will take you about an hour to complete. The exam is all multiple choice. You have to take the exam at an FAA certified Testing Center. Immediately upon completion of the exam you will know whether or not you passed. You must to achieve a score of 70%



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or better to pass. If you don't pass you can take the exam again. It is definitely advantageous to pass the exam the first time, if you don't

1. Most exams cost \$100.00 each time you take it; so failing it multiple times can get expensive.
2. With the advent of the Pilot Records and Information Act (PRIA, 1996), employers are required to research all your test scores and number of attempts. It is in the new pilot's best interest to STUDY STUDY STUDY!

The Oral Exam and Check Flight

On the day of the exam, your FAA Examiner or FAA Designated Examiner will administer an oral exam to you before you are allowed to show them your flying skills. The oral exam consists of about 75 questions and will take you about 4-5 hours to complete.

An FAA Examiner is an FAA employee; an FAA Designated Examiner is not an FAA employee but has been certified by the FAA to give the exam.

The check flight is the final step in the process. If you have prepared properly you shouldn't have any problem passing this test. During the check flight the Examiner will ask you to:

- Pilot situational awareness
- Pilot demeanor and contentionsness for safety
- Pickup at Hover
- Set down at Hover
- Normal Approach
- Steep/Shallow Approaches
- Autorotation
- Pinnacle Landing

And lots more!

When you are done, the Examiner will complete their report on your check flight and issue you either a temporary flying permit or a pink slip indicating which parts of the check flight you were unable to complete and will have to be repeated. In most cases, you will only have to come back and demonstrate your skill in those areas where you failed on your initial attempt.

Well that's it. You are now a licensed helicopter pilot. And all it took was 4 simple steps!