



What You Need to Know About DOT Medical Cards

The Department of Transportation (DOT) Medical Card—also known as a Medical Examiner’s Certificate (MEC)—is more than just a formality. For motor carriers, it’s a regulatory requirement directly tied to driver qualification, safety compliance, and risk management. Understanding how DOT medical cards work, what records must be kept, and how to manage compliance effectively can protect your company from fines, out-of-service orders, and liability exposure.

1. What the DOT Medical Card Is and Why It Matters

The DOT Medical Card certifies that a commercial motor vehicle (CMV) driver meets the physical and medical standards required by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). It ensures that drivers are medically qualified to safely operate a CMV under 49 CFR §391.41. Without a valid medical card, a driver cannot legally drive in interstate commerce, and the carrier cannot legally dispatch that driver.

Key takeaway: A valid DOT Medical Card is part of a driver’s qualification file, and carriers share equal responsibility for ensuring compliance.

2. Who Needs a DOT Medical Card

Any driver operating a commercial vehicle over 10,000 pounds GVWR, transporting hazardous materials, or carrying 8+ passengers (for compensation) or 15+ passengers (not for compensation) must have a valid DOT Medical Card if operating in interstate commerce. Many states also impose intrastate medical certification requirements—often mirroring federal standards. Carriers should confirm the rules in every state where they operate.

3. Certification Must Come from a Registered Medical Examiner

Drivers must obtain their physical exam and certification from a medical professional listed on the FMCSA National Registry of Certified Medical Examiners. This registry ensures that examiners are trained to apply DOT medical standards consistently.

Carriers should verify that the examiner’s National Registry number appears on the medical certificate. A missing or invalid number can cause state licensing agencies to reject a medical card submission.

4. Understanding Validity Periods and Renewal Requirements

A DOT Medical Card is typically valid for up to 24 months, but shorter durations (such as 3, 6, or 12 months) may be issued if the examiner needs to monitor conditions like high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes or sleep apnea. Carriers should track all expiration dates and implement reminders 60–90 days before renewal to prevent lapses.

5. Recordkeeping and Compliance Requirements

Under FMCSA regulations, carriers must:

- A. Keep a copy of the driver's current medical certificate in the Driver Qualification (DQ) file.
- B. Verify that the driver's state record reflects a valid medical status.
- C. Remove or reassign drivers whose medical certification has expired or been disqualified.

Carriers should also confirm that the driver's motor vehicle record (MVR) aligns with company records.

6. What Happens When a Medical Card Expires

If a driver's DOT medical card expires:

- A. The driver is immediately disqualified from operating a CMV.
- B. The state licensing agency may downgrade or suspend the CDL.
- C. Dispatching that driver can expose the carrier to FMCSA penalties, insurance violations, and liability.

Carriers should treat an expired DOT medical card as a critical compliance issue—just like an expired CDL.

7. Medical Conditions That Can Affect Certification

Certain health conditions can impact a driver's ability to obtain or renew a DOT Medical Card, including:

- A. Uncontrolled hypertension or diabetes
- B. Heart conditions
- C. Seizure disorders
- D. Vision or hearing impairments
- E. Sleep apnea or other fatigue-related conditions

Carriers can help drivers manage these issues proactively by promoting wellness programs and educating drivers about documentation requirements.

8. Electronic Recordkeeping and Integration

Modern fleet compliance systems can automatically track driver medical card status, link certification dates to DQ files, and generate alerts before expirations. Using technology for compliance ensures your operation stays audit-ready and reduces administrative errors.

9. Carrier Responsibilities in Audits and Inspections

During a DOT or FMCSA compliance review, auditors will request proof that each active driver has:

- A. A current medical certificate on file
- B. An MVR reflecting valid medical status
- C. Proper recordkeeping under Part 391.51

Failure to produce valid documentation is a serious violation that can result in fines, downgraded safety ratings, or operational restrictions.

10. Best Practices for Carriers

To stay compliant and avoid costly penalties, carriers should:

- A. Maintain a centralized Driver Qualification File system
- B. Use a digital compliance calendar for renewals
- C. Conduct periodic internal audits of driver files
- D. Train dispatchers and fleet managers on disqualification procedures
- E. Partner with a trusted occupational health provider for consistent exams and record tracking.

Final Thoughts

DOT medical certification isn't just a driver responsibility—it's a carrier obligation. Maintaining accurate, up-to-date medical records is essential for regulatory compliance, operational safety, and protecting your company from legal and financial exposure. By implementing proactive monitoring systems, supporting driver wellness, and ensuring documentation accuracy, carriers can stay compliant and keep their fleets safely on the road.

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