

Helicopter Pilot

Fly air ambulances, tours, news cameras, power line patrols and firefighting buckets. Cheap to get licensed, brutally expensive to become employable.

TYPICAL PAY

\$123,220

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$59k to \$267k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

2 to 5 years

after high school

DEMAND

Good

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Air ambulance bases, tour operators, news stations, power li...

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 11 and 12
Physics and math. Get medically checked early: if you cannot hold a medical certificate, you need to know that before you spend anything.
- 2 Private pilot certificate, helicopter** 4 to 8 months
Your first certificate. Solo flight, navigation, radio work, and a checkride with an examiner.
- 3 Commercial pilot certificate** 12 to 18 months in total
Federal rules require at least 150 hours of flight time, including 50 hours in helicopters, 35 hours as pilot in command in helicopters, and a cross-country flight of more than 300 nautical miles.
- 4 Instrument rating and flight instructor certificate** 6 to 12 months
Not legally required to fly commercially, but the combination is how you get hired and how you build hours while being paid.
- 5 Build hours, then get a real job** 2 to 4 years
Instruct or fly tours until you reach the hour minimums operators insist on, commonly around 1,000 hours or more. Then air ambulance, utility, offshore or corporate flying opens up.

Pros and cons

- + No degree required, and the certificate itself takes about a year and a half
- + Experienced pilots are genuinely well paid
- + The work is useful: air ambulance, firefighting, search and rescue, storm recovery
- The training bill is enormous and the first jobs pay poorly
- A long gap between being licensed and being employable
- Weather, night flying and off-airport landings make this genuinely more dangerous than airline flying

Optional boosts

Instrument rating. Flight instructor certificate. Turbine time. Military aviation.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Commercial Pilots (53-2012.00)
Code of Federal Regulations, Title 14, Section 61.129: commercial pilot aeronautical experience
Vertical Aviation International, the helicopter industry association
Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association: Learn to Fly

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/helicopter-pilot>

Good to know

150 hours to be legal, 1,000 to be hired

Federal rules let you hold a commercial helicopter certificate at 150 hours of flight time. Almost no employer and almost no insurance company will take you anywhere near that. The gap between the lega...

You have to fly 300 miles in one go

Tucked inside the commercial helicopter requirements is one cross-country flight of more than 300 nautical miles with landings at three points. In a training helicopter that is a long, slow, weather-dep...



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