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How Old Is Your Plane?

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That is the question on some travelers' minds following the fuselage rupture on a Southwest flight on Friday that that prompted the carrier to temporarily ground part of its fleet and led the Federal Aviation Administration to issue a directive calling for inspections of some older-model Boeing 737s for similar cracks.

Airlines spell out the type of aircraft you'll be flying on during the online booking process, but they don't share the age of the planes with customers.

While you may not know exactly how old the plane you're flying on is, there are statistics on the average age of fleets. Delta has one of the oldest fleets among domestic carriers, with an average age of 16 years, according to Ascend, an aviation consultancy in London. American and United each have fleets with an average age of 15.14 and 14.98 respectively. JetBlue has one of the youngest fleets with an average age of 5.83 years. (See chart below for fleet age by type of aircraft.)

Keep in mind that even if you are scheduled to fly on one of the newest planes in an airline's fleet, you could still end up on an older model if the carrier needs to switch aircraft at the last minute because of delays or maintenance issues. "As our routings and the way we schedule our aircraft is very fluid," said Chris Mainz, a spokesman for Southwest, "the actual aircraft used for a particular flight can change as needed."

And while older planes may be delayed by mechanical problems more frequently than new planes, industry watchers say older planes are still safe to fly as long as they are well maintained.

"I don't necessarily see this as a symptom of an aging fleet in the U.S.," Patrick Smith, an airline pilot who writes the "Ask the Pilot" column for Salon.com, said of the recent Southwest fuselage hole. Airlines, he added, "are built to last more or less indefinitely so long as they are maintained and inspected appropriately."