

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Filing a Gulf War and Undiagnosed Illness Claim

File a complete Gulf War claim for an
undiagnosed or unexplained illness.



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A FWD Assist HQ Field Guide

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This guide is education, not representation. It explains how part of the VA system works so you can handle your own business with confidence. It is not legal or claims advice, and reading it does not create any representative relationship between you and the author. The author is not affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and nothing here is endorsed by the VA.

This guide prints no live VA dollar figures and no rating percentages on purpose, because they change. Before you make a decision based on any number, check the current figure at va.gov. No book can promise you a rating; the evidence in your file decides the result. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Officer is always free.

In crisis? Call the **Veterans Crisis Line**: dial **988**, then press **1**. You can also text **838255** or chat online at veteranscrisisline.net. It is free, confidential, and available 24/7.

Filing a Gulf War and Undiagnosed Illness Claim

File a complete Gulf War claim for an undiagnosed or unexplained illness.

Companion to *The PACT Act Playbook*.

This is general education, not legal or claims advice, and not guidance for your specific claim. It cannot promise you a rating or an outcome, and no one can. For help with your own claim, see a free accredited representative (see [the back of this guide](#)). Nothing here creates a representative relationship.

Current as of October 2026. Rules, forms, and figures change. Check current details at va.gov.

THE BEST WAY TO USE THIS GUIDE

The strongest position is to be your own informed advocate and to work with a free accredited representative. An accredited Veterans Service Organization, such as the DAV, VFW, American Legion, or a county or state veterans office, helps at no charge. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can help too. They can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim, and after that they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide is here so you understand your own situation and can work with them as a full partner instead of handing it over blind. If you'd rather handle this yourself, and you're comfortable doing that, the guide walks you through every step. Either way, you stay in control.

The Outcome and What You Need Before You Start

The outcome: By the end of this guide you'll have filed a complete claim for a Gulf War undiagnosed illness or medically unexplained chronic multisymptom illness on VA Form 21-526EZ, with your qualifying service and six months of symptoms documented.

This guide prepares you for the task. It doesn't and can't promise a rating, a percentage, or an outcome. The evidence in your file decides the result.

WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START

- ☐ A way to get on VA.gov, or VA's main number, 1-800-827-1000.
- ☐ Records showing service in a recognized location on or after August 2, 1990.
- ☐ A symptom log and medical records covering at least six months.
- ☐ Any diagnosis you already have, or a clear description of symptoms no one has explained.
- ☐ The names, cities, and treatment dates of the places that hold your records.
- ☐ Your VA file number, if you have one.

When to start: Today. Payments generally can't start before VA gets your claim or your Intent to File, so every month you wait is a month that can't be paid.

Start Here: The Basics

Some Gulf War veterans live with chronic symptoms that doctors can't tie to a clear diagnosis. The law presumes these are connected to service for a Persian Gulf veteran. That means service on or after August 2, 1990 in the Southwest Asia theater, or in Afghanistan, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, or Jordan. The illness has to be chronic, meaning six months or more, or six months of coming and going. It also has to show up in a way someone else can check: signs a doctor can see, or other facts that can be verified. It covers three groups: undiagnosed illnesses; diagnosed illnesses with no known cause, like chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, and functional gastrointestinal disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome; and nine listed infectious diseases with their own timing rules. You don't have to prove what caused it.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 1117(a) and (f); 38 CFR § 3.317(a)(2) through (a)(4), (c), and (e).

The Steps

STEP 1

File an Intent to File today.

Go to va.gov/resources/your-intent-to-file-a-va-claim, call 1-800-827-1000, or mail VA Form 21-0966. If you start the online 21-526EZ while signed in, VA records it for you. Save the confirmation.

Do not wait until every symptom is documented. The Intent to File holds your date for one year, but only if the complete claim follows within that year.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.155(b).

Done when you have a confirmation saved.

STEP 2

Confirm your qualifying service and location.

Pull the orders, deployment records, or evaluations that show where and when you served. For undiagnosed and unexplained illnesses, the places are Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the neutral zone, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, and the Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea and Red Sea. Afghanistan, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Syria and Jordan count too. For the infectious diseases, the list is shorter, and Afghanistan counts only on or after September 19, 2001.

If your records clearly show a listed place and date, **then** flag those pages. **If** your time there is hard to prove, **then** add unit records and statements from people who served with you on VA Form 21-10210, and ask a free accredited representative to help.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 1117(f); 38 CFR § 3.317(c)(3)(ii) and (e)(2).

Done when you have records showing service in a listed place on or after August 2, 1990.

STEP 3

Document your symptoms and show they're chronic.

Keep a symptom log and gather your medical records. VA counts a disability as chronic if it has lasted six months or more, or has come and gone over six months, measured from the first evidence of it. Write down how often each symptom hits, how bad it gets, and what it stops you from doing at work and at home. Things others can verify count too, like missed work or a spouse's account on VA Form 21-10210.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.317(a)(3) and (a)(4).

Done when you can show each symptom has lasted six months or more and how it limits you.

STEP 4

Match your claim to the right group.

Undiagnosed illnesses can show up as fatigue, skin problems, headaches, muscle or joint pain, nerve or memory problems, breathing, sleep, stomach or heart symptoms, weight loss, or menstrual disorders. Unexplained illnesses include chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, and functional gastrointestinal disorders like irritable bowel syndrome.

If no doctor has explained your symptoms, **then** claim them as an undiagnosed illness and describe each one. **If** you've been diagnosed with fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, or a functional GI disorder, **then** claim it by that name. **If** your symptoms now have a known diagnosis with a known cause, like asthma or a structural GI disease, **then** this rule doesn't cover it. Look at the burn pit list (asthma, sinusitis, rhinitis and others) or direct service connection, and take it to an accredited representative.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.317(a)(1)(ii), (a)(2), and (b); 38 U.S.C. § 1120.

Done when you've sorted your symptoms into the group that fits.

STEP 5

Fill out VA Form 21-526EZ and describe your symptoms plainly.

Name each symptom or diagnosis and say you're claiming it based on your Gulf War service. List each VA and private provider with city and treatment dates. Don't force a diagnosis you don't have. An undiagnosed illness can be claimed as one.

Do not let a cluster of symptoms get lumped into one vague line. Describe each body system so none gets missed.

Done when each symptom or condition is on the form and your Gulf War service is stated.

STEP 6

Get ready for the Gulf War C&P exam.

Expect a general medical exam built for Gulf War illness. Bring your symptom log and be ready to say when each symptom started, how often it happens, and what it keeps you from doing. Describe your bad days as they really are, including how often they come. Don't play them down, and don't stretch them.

Do not skip the exam. If you can't make it, call before the appointment to reschedule. Without good cause, VA decides a first claim on what's already in the file.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.655(b).

Done when you have written notes on each symptom and its daily impact to take to the exam.

STEP 7

Send one organized package and keep proof.

Put the 21-526EZ, your service and location evidence, symptom log, statements, and medical records together with a short cover page listing what's inside. File online at va.gov/disability/file-disability-claim-form-21-526ez and save the confirmation. Or mail it to: Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444, with tracking.

Done when your package is sent and you have a dated confirmation or tracking receipt.

STEP 8

Confirm VA got everything, and know your options after a denial.

About 10 days after you file, check va.gov/claim-or-appeal-status or call 1-800-827-1000. Make sure the claim shows as received and each document is in the file.

If VA denied a Gulf War condition in the past (for example, your place of service wasn't on the list before the PACT Act), **then** file a Supplemental Claim on VA Form 20-0995, the Decision Review Request: Supplemental Claim, with any new and relevant evidence. VA's website says an Intent to File can hold your date for a Supplemental Claim, but the regulation says its Intent to File rule doesn't apply to Supplemental Claims. Don't count on it. Send VA Form 20-0995 itself as soon as you can.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR §§ 3.155 and 3.2501.

Done when you've confirmed your documents are on file and know your next move if a condition was denied.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Filed an Intent to File and saved the confirmation.
- ☐ Confirmed my service in a listed place on or after August 2, 1990.
- ☐ Documented each symptom and showed it has lasted six months or more.
- ☐ Matched my claim to the right group (undiagnosed, unexplained, or infectious), or found another path.
- ☐ Filled out the 21-526EZ describing each symptom or diagnosis and my Gulf War service.
- ☐ Prepared specific, honest notes for the Gulf War C&P exam.
- ☐ Sent one organized package and kept proof.
- ☐ Confirmed my documents are on file and know my options after a denial.

Reminder: rules and rates change. Check any current figure at va.gov. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. This guide prepared you for the task. The evidence in your file decides the result.

Get Free, Accredited Help

For anything about your own claim, talk to an accredited representative. Help from an accredited Veterans Service Organization is free. Accredited claims agents and attorneys can't charge for work done before VA issues its initial decision on your claim. After that, they may charge a fee within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Free help is available through Veterans Service Organizations such as the DAV, VFW, and American Legion, and through county and state veterans offices.

To find one near you, visit va.gov/get-help-from-accredited-representative. Representation begins only when you sign VA Form 21-22 (for a Veterans Service Organization) or 21-22a (for an individual agent or attorney). With one rare exception for a single unpaid case, only accredited people can represent you before the VA, and only an accredited agent or attorney can charge you a fee. Nothing in this guide creates that relationship.

A warning about claim sharks. Anyone who offers to file your initial claim for a fee, or who guarantees you a rating or a percentage, is selling something you shouldn't buy. Accredited Veterans Service Organizations help at no charge, and accredited claims agents and attorneys may charge only after VA issues its initial decision, within the limits of 38 CFR 14.636. Report predatory companies to the VA Office of Inspector General at 1-800-488-8244.

Keep Going: The Full Guide

This field guide is the short, do-this-now companion to the book *The PACT Act Playbook*. See every FWD Assist HQ title that is out now at fwdassisthq.com/books.

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About the Author

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J. Erickson is a service-disabled Air Force veteran. He served as a military firefighter and as a veteran service officer, where he spent years walking veterans through the same claims process he writes about now. He holds an MBA and writes plain-language guides for veterans who want to understand the system without a translator.

He writes the For the Rest of Us series at fwdassisthq.com. This guide is published by FWD Assist HQ as a veteran education resource. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.