

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Filing a Presumptive Service-Connection Claim

File a complete claim under a presumptive
service-connection pathway.



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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 Presumptive Service-Connection Claim

File a complete claim under a presumptive service-connection pathway.

Companion to *A VA Disability Claims Manual for the Rest of Us*.

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 under a presumptive pathway, with your condition and service matched to the current presumptive category and your qualifying service and condition 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

- ☐ Your DD214 and any deployment, travel, or exposure records.
- ☐ A current medical record about the condition you want to claim (for most categories it needs to name a diagnosis).
- ☐ Notes on where and when you served, and any known toxic exposure, radiation, prisoner-of-war status, or Gulf War service.
- ☐ Access to VA.gov to check the current presumptive lists and to file.
- ☐ A free accredited representative on standby for anything that branches beyond this guide.

When to start: As soon as you believe your service and condition fit a presumptive category. Put an Intent to File on record first, then confirm the current list.

Start Here: The Basics

For some conditions tied to specific service, the law presumes the link to service, so you don't need a medical opinion for that part. You still need to show the qualifying service and the condition. The main categories are certain chronic diseases that show up within a set time after service, former prisoners of war, radiation exposure, herbicide exposure (Agent Orange), Camp Lejeune water, Gulf War service, and burn pits and other toxic exposures under the PACT Act. Each category has its own list of conditions, places, dates, and timing rules, and Congress and VA add to them. This guide shows how to file and points you to va.gov for the current lists.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. §§ 1112, 1116, 1117, 1118, 1119, 1120; 38 CFR § 3.307; 38 CFR § 3.309; 38 CFR § 3.317; 38 CFR § 3.320.

The Steps

STEP 1

Identify your qualifying service history.

How: Gather your DD214 and any records that show where and when you served, deployments, and known exposures. Presumptive categories turn on specific service: places, dates, exposures, radiation, or prisoner-of-war status.

Done when you can state, with a document behind it, the qualifying service you're relying on.

STEP 2

Check the current presumptive lists at va.gov for your condition and service.

How: Start at [VA's PACT Act page](#), which links to each category, or go straight to the pages for [Agent Orange](#) and [Gulf War illness](#). Read the current page, not an older summary.

Decision point. If your condition and service both appear on the current list, file under that category. If your condition is close but not listed, or you're unsure, ask a free accredited representative, and plan to support a direct claim with a medical opinion as well.

Do not: rely on an old printed list. Conditions and places get added, and a stale list can lead you to skip a claim you could file.

Done when you've checked your condition and service against the current va.gov list.

STEP 3

Get the VA toxic exposure screening if you use VA health care.

How: VA health care offers every enrolled veteran a toxic exposure screening. Ask for it at your next appointment or contact your VA facility. It records your exposure history in your health record and points you to registry exams and benefits. It isn't a claim and isn't required to file one.

Done when your screening is done or scheduled, or you've decided it doesn't apply to you.

STEP 4

Confirm the medical record your category needs.

How: For most presumptive categories, pull a medical record that names a listed condition. Some categories also have a timing rule, such as a chronic disease that has to show up to a set degree within a set time after service.

Decision point. If you're a Gulf War veteran with an undiagnosed illness, **then** the lack of a clear diagnosis is the point. If you have a diagnosed illness whose cause is unexplained, such as chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, or a functional gastrointestinal disorder, **then** that diagnosis counts; the presumption covers it. Either way, you need records that show the symptoms over at least six months. **If** your category has a timing rule, **then** gather the records that show when the condition started.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 1117; 38 CFR § 3.307(a); 38 CFR § 3.317.

Done when you have the medical record your category calls for.

STEP 5

Put an Intent to File on record to protect your start date.

How: Starting the online claim while signed in to a verified VA.gov account records it automatically. You can also submit VA Form 21-0966, Intent to File a Claim for Compensation and/or Pension, or Survivors Pension and/or D.I.C., online, call 1-800-827-1000, or file it by mail or in person. If VA gets the complete claim within one year, the claim counts as filed on the intent-to-file date.

Do not: wait to put an intent to file on record until the claim is perfect. Waiting can cost you back pay.

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

Done when your Intent to File confirmation is saved.

STEP 6

Gather proof of the qualifying service and the condition.

How: Collect the records that show your qualifying service or exposure and the medical records from Step 4. Put them in one folder.

Done when your qualifying-service proof and your medical records are together in one place.

STEP 7

Complete VA Form 21-526EZ and name the presumptive category.

How: File VA Form 21-526EZ, Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits, online at [VA.gov](https://va.gov), or on paper to Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444. Name the condition and the exposure or service you're relying on, and answer the form's toxic exposure questions.

Done when the form names the condition and the exposure or service behind it.

STEP 8

Keep a direct or secondary path open where the presumption doesn't squarely fit.

How: If your condition is near a listed presumptive but not on it, you can still claim it on a direct basis with a medical opinion, while noting the exposure. A presumption not applying doesn't bar direct service connection.

Decision point. If the presumption clearly applies, file under it. If it's a close call, ask a free accredited representative to help you support both the presumptive and a direct or secondary basis in the same claim.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.303(d); 38 CFR § 3.310.

Done when you know which basis your evidence supports and, where needed, a backup basis is supported too.

STEP 9

Attach your evidence and decide on a Fully Developed Claim.

How: Attach the service and exposure proof and the medical records. If you're sending all the evidence you have and can certify there's nothing more VA might need, you can file it as a Fully Developed Claim. If you expect more records, file a standard claim; you can keep adding evidence for up to one year from the date of VA's letter asking for it, but VA can decide sooner, so send it as soon as you can.

Done when your evidence is attached and you've chosen a Fully Developed or standard claim.

STEP 10

Submit, attend any exam, and track the claim to a decision.

How: Submit and watch your claim status on VA.gov. Go to any C&P exam VA schedules and describe the condition honestly.

Decision point. If granted, check the current compensation figure at va.gov. If you disagree with the decision, you have one year from the decision notice to request a Higher-Level Review (VA Form 20-0996) or a Board Appeal (VA Form 10182). A Supplemental Claim (VA Form 20-0995) with new and relevant evidence can be filed later, but filing it within that year keeps your original start date. A free accredited representative can help you weigh them.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.655; 38 CFR § 3.2500.

Done when the claim is submitted, any exam is attended, and you have a decision or a next step.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Identified my qualifying service history with a document behind it.
- ☐ Checked my condition against the current presumptive lists at va.gov.
- ☐ Got the VA toxic exposure screening, or decided it doesn't apply.
- ☐ Confirmed the medical record my category needs.
- ☐ Put an Intent to File on record to protect my start date.
- ☐ Gathered proof of qualifying service and the condition in one place.
- ☐ Completed VA Form 21-526EZ naming the condition and the exposure or service.
- ☐ Kept a direct or secondary path open where the presumption didn't squarely fit.
- ☐ Attached my evidence and chose a Fully Developed or standard claim.
- ☐ Submitted, attended any exam, and tracked the claim to a decision.

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 *A VA Disability Claims Manual for the Rest of Us*. 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.