

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Filing a Radiculopathy or Sciatica Claim

File a radiculopathy claim, usually as
secondary to a service-connected spine
condition.



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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 Radiculopathy or Sciatica Claim

File a radiculopathy claim, usually as secondary to a service-connected spine condition.

Companion to *VA Back, Knee, and Joint Claims Guide*.

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 file a radiculopathy or sciatica claim on VA Form 21-526EZ, tied to your spine condition, with each affected leg or arm named on its own.

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

- ☐ Internet access for VA.gov, or the VA phone line at 1-800-827-1000.
- ☐ A current diagnosis of radiculopathy or sciatica, ideally naming the nerve or nerve root.
- ☐ The name and diagnostic code of your back or neck condition, and whether VA has already service connected it.
- ☐ Any EMG or nerve conduction study, or exam notes showing radiating pain, numbness, tingling, weakness, or lost reflexes.
- ☐ A note of which limb or limbs are affected.
- ☐ Your VA file number, if you have one.

When to start: Today. Once VA has your Intent to File, you have one year to send the complete claim, and VA treats the claim as filed on the Intent to File date. If you file within a year of leaving service, the effective date can reach back to the day after discharge. Otherwise it's usually the date VA gets the claim (or the Intent to File date), or the date the condition arose if that's later.

Start Here: The Basics

Radiculopathy is nerve pain, numbness, or weakness that runs from a spine problem down an arm or leg. When it follows the sciatic nerve down the leg, people call it sciatica. VA rates it under the peripheral nerve codes. The sciatic nerve is Diagnostic Code 8520. Arm nerves from the neck have their own codes, starting at DC 8510. For the sciatic nerve, the levels run from mild, moderate, and moderately severe up to severe incomplete paralysis, and then complete paralysis. The arm nerve codes skip the moderately severe level and have separate columns for your dominant and non-dominant arm. When the problem is only numbness or tingling (sensory), the rating stops at mild or, at most, moderate.

When the back or neck is rated on range of motion, VA rates nerve problems from it separately, one rating for each affected limb. When both legs or both arms are rated at a paying level, VA applies the bilateral factor unless leaving it out gives a better combined rating. There's one exception. If your disc condition (intervertebral disc syndrome) is rated on incapacitating episodes instead, that rating already covers the nerve symptoms, and VA uses whichever method comes out higher overall. This guide prints no percentages. See how VA rates conditions at [va.gov](https://www.va.gov).

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.71a, General Rating Formula Note (1) and DC 5243; 38 CFR § 4.124a; 38 CFR § 4.26; 38 CFR § 3.310.

The Steps

STEP 1

File an Intent to File to protect your date.

How. Submit it online at va.gov/resources/your-intent-to-file-a-va-claim, call 1-800-827-1000, or mail VA Form 21-0966. Save the confirmation.

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

Done when you have a confirmation saved.

STEP 2

Confirm where your spine condition stands.

How. Find the exact name and diagnostic code of your back or neck condition on your VA decision letter, and how it's rated.

If VA already service connected your back or neck, **then** claim the radiculopathy as secondary to it. **If** the spine isn't service connected yet, **then** claim the spine condition and the radiculopathy together on the same 21-526EZ. **If** your disc condition is rated on incapacitating episodes, **then** ask a free accredited representative how a nerve claim fits with that rating.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.310(a); 38 CFR § 4.71a, DC 5243.

Done when you've written down your spine condition, its code, and which path fits.

STEP 3

Get the nerve involvement documented.

How. Ask your provider to record radiating pain, numbness, tingling, weakness, reflex changes, or muscle wasting, which limb it runs down, and the nerve or root involved. An EMG or nerve conduction study helps but isn't always needed.

Done when you have records that describe the nerve findings and name the affected limb.

STEP 4

Name each affected limb on its own.

How. If both legs are involved, name both. If an arm is involved from a neck condition, name it too, and make sure the record says whether it's your dominant arm. Each limb is rated on its own.

If your symptoms come and go, **then** ask the provider to note how often they flare, how long they last, and what strength, feeling, or reflexes you lose, since the rating reflects how much the nerve is impaired.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.124a; 38 CFR § 4.69.

Done when you've listed every affected limb as its own claimed condition.

STEP 5

Get the medical opinion linking the nerve to the spine.

How. Ask a provider to state whether your radiculopathy is at least as likely as not caused by, or made worse by, your named spine condition. VA may also get an opinion at your C&P exam.

Done when you have a written opinion linking the nerve to your spine, or you know VA will get one.

STEP 6

File the 21-526EZ naming the nerve and limbs, and confirm it arrived.

How. List it as, for example, "right lower extremity radiculopathy, secondary to service-connected lumbar degenerative disc disease." Attach the nerve findings and the opinion. File online at [VA.gov](https://va.gov), or mail it to Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444. About 10 days later, check VA.gov or call 1-800-827-1000 to confirm every document is in your file.

Done when the claim names each limb and the spine condition, and you've confirmed VA has everything.

STEP 7

Get ready for the exam VA schedules.

How. Expect strength, reflex, and sensation testing. Describe the radiating pain and numbness honestly, how often it flares, and what it stops you from doing.

Done when you've gone to the exam ready to describe your nerve symptoms and limits in plain terms.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Filed an Intent to File and saved the confirmation.
- ☐ Confirmed the spine condition, its code, and which path fits.
- ☐ Documented the nerve findings and the affected limb.
- ☐ Named each affected limb as its own claimed condition.
- ☐ Got a medical opinion tied to the spine, or know VA will get one.
- ☐ Filed the 21-526EZ naming the nerve and limbs, and confirmed VA has everything.
- ☐ Went to the exam ready to describe my nerve symptoms.

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 *VA Back, Knee, and Joint Claims Guide*. See every FWD Assist HQ title that is out now at fwdassisthq.com/books.

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

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.

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