

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Filing a Shoulder or Arm Claim

File a complete, well-documented shoulder or arm claim built on your range of motion.



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A FWD Assist HQ Field Guide

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By J. Erickson | An FWD Assist HQ Field Guide | Publisher: FWD Assist HQ | First Edition, 2026

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 Shoulder or Arm Claim

File a complete, well-documented shoulder or arm claim built on your range of motion.

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 shoulder or arm claim on VA Form 21-526EZ that documents your measured range of motion, which arm is your dominant one, and what you lose during flare-ups.

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 for the shoulder or arm condition (for example impingement, rotator cuff tear, labral tear, or arthritis).
- ☐ A note of which arm is your dominant (writing) arm.
- ☐ Any range-of-motion measurements, physical therapy notes, X-rays, or MRI reports you already have.
- ☐ Service records or your own account of the in-service injury, fall, or repetitive overhead work.
- ☐ 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

VA rates the shoulder and arm under its musculoskeletal schedule. Limited arm motion is Diagnostic Code 5201. Other shoulder problems, like a frozen (ankylosed) joint, a dislocating shoulder, or a badly healed collarbone or shoulder blade, have their own codes (DC 5200, 5202, 5203). The elbow, forearm, and wrist are rated under DC 5205 to 5215.

Two things shape a shoulder rating that veterans often miss. First, the schedule has separate columns for your dominant (major) arm and your non-dominant (minor) arm, so the record has to say which one is hurt. Second, VA looks at how high you can raise the arm and at what you lose to pain, weakness, and flare-ups, not just one good-day measurement. This guide prints no rating percentages. See how VA rates conditions at va.gov.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.71a; 38 CFR § 4.69; 38 CFR §§ 4.40, 4.45.

The Steps

STEP 1

Start the clock with an Intent to File.

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.

Do not wait for a perfect MRI before you open the claim. The Intent to File holds your date for one year while you gather evidence.

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

Done when you have a confirmation saved.

STEP 2

Get the diagnosis named and the side recorded.

How. See your provider, confirm the specific diagnosis, and make sure the record says left or right and whether it's your dominant arm.

Done when you have a current diagnosis that names the condition and the side.

STEP 3

Get your range of motion measured with a goniometer.

How. Ask a provider or physical therapist to measure forward flexion, abduction, and rotation with a goniometer, and to record where pain starts, not just where motion stops. Ask them to note weakness, fatigue, and any motion you lose after repeated movement.

If your motion is worse on some days than others, **then** ask that the record describe your flare-ups: how often they come, how long they last, and what you can't do during one. VA has to consider functional loss during flare-ups.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR §§ 4.40, 4.45, 4.46, 4.59; Sharp v. Shulkin, 29 Vet. App. 26 (2017).

Done when you have a measurement that shows your degrees of motion and where pain starts.

STEP 4

Pin down how the shoulder or arm was hurt.

How. Write a short statement about the injury, or the years of overhead lifting, rucking, or repetitive work.

If it started in service, **then** claim it directly and point to the injury or duties. **If** it started after service because you favored another service-connected joint, **then** name that joint and claim this one as secondary. **If** you had the problem before service and service made it worse, **then** ask a free accredited representative about the aggravation rules. **If** arthritis in the joint showed up to at least the lowest paying level within one year after you left active service, **then** ask a free accredited representative about the chronic-disease presumption. It can connect arthritis to service without a medical opinion.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.303; 38 CFR § 3.306; 38 CFR §§ 3.307(a)(3), 3.309(a); 38 CFR § 3.310.

Done when you've written down your path to service connection and named the other joint if it's secondary.

STEP 5

Get a medical opinion if the link isn't already in your records.

How. Ask a provider to state whether your condition is at least as likely as not related to the in-service injury or overuse, or caused or made worse by a named service-connected condition. VA may also get an opinion at your C&P exam.

Done when you have a written opinion that connects the condition to service, or you know VA will get one at the exam.

STEP 6

File VA Form 21-526EZ and name the joint and side.

How. List the condition by diagnosis and side, for example "right (dominant) shoulder rotator cuff tear." Attach your measurements, imaging, and any medical opinion.

Done when the condition is named on the form with the side, and your evidence is attached.

STEP 7

Get ready for the C&P exam.

How. The examiner should measure your motion with a goniometer, test for pain on active and passive motion, compare the other arm if it's undamaged, and check what changes after repeated use. Describe your flare-ups honestly: how often, how long, and what you can't lift or reach during one. If you can't fully raise the arm, say so and let them measure it.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.46; 38 CFR § 4.59.

Done when you can describe your flare-ups and your limits in plain, specific terms.

STEP 8

Submit one organized package and confirm it arrived.

How. File online at [VA.gov](https://va.gov) and save the confirmation, or mail it to Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444, and keep a copy. About 10 days later, check VA.gov or call 1-800-827-1000 to confirm every document is in your file.

Done when you have a dated confirmation and you've checked that each document is in your claims file.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Filed an Intent to File and saved the confirmation.
- ☐ Diagnosis names the condition, the side, and whether it's my dominant arm.
- ☐ Range of motion measured with a goniometer, with the point where pain starts.
- ☐ Wrote down my path: direct, secondary, or aggravation.
- ☐ Got a medical opinion, or know VA will get one at the exam.
- ☐ Filed the 21-526EZ naming the condition and the side.
- ☐ Ready to describe my flare-ups and limits honestly at the exam.
- ☐ Submitted one labeled package and confirmed VA has everything.

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.

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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.