

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Filing an Ankle Claim

File a complete ankle claim built on your range of motion and instability.



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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 an Ankle Claim

File a complete ankle claim built on your range of motion and instability.

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 an ankle claim on VA Form 21-526EZ that documents your lost motion, any instability, and, where a provider links them, the knee, hip, or back problems the ankle caused.

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 ankle diagnosis (for example sprain residuals, arthritis, instability, or a fused joint).
- ☐ Range-of-motion notes, X-rays, and any brace or orthotic prescription.
- ☐ Records of the in-service ankle injury or repetitive strain.
- ☐ A note of any knee, hip, or back pain that started after you began favoring the ankle.
- ☐ 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 ankle under its musculoskeletal schedule. Limited ankle motion is Diagnostic Code 5271, and a fused (ankylosed) ankle is DC 5270. Related codes cover a fused subtalar joint, a badly healed heel or ankle bone, and removal of the talus (DC 5272 to 5274). The rating turns mostly on how much up-and-down motion you've lost, and at the severe end on whether the joint is fixed.

The ankle codes don't have a separate line for instability. An ankle that gives way still counts: VA has to weigh looseness, weakness, pain, and trouble standing and walking as functional loss. There's a second reason the ankle matters. Years of limping can strain the knee, hip, and lower back, and a provider may link those to the ankle. 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; 38 CFR §§ 4.40, 4.45; 38 CFR § 3.310.

The Steps

STEP 1

Protect your effective date 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.

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

Done when you have a confirmation saved.

STEP 2

Document your current motion and any instability.

How. Have a provider measure dorsiflexion and plantar flexion with a goniometer and note whether the ankle is unstable or gives way. If you wear a brace or use an orthotic, get that in the record.

If your ankle is fused or barely moves, **then** make sure the record says whether it's ankylosed and gives the fixed angle, because VA rates a fixed joint differently from limited motion.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.46; 38 CFR § 4.71a, DC 5270, 5271.

Done when you have a current measurement and a note of any instability.

STEP 3

Tie the ankle to service.

How. Write down the in-service sprain, fracture, or years of jump and march strain. Get your service treatment records if you can.

If you had ankle trouble 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).

Done when you've connected the ankle to a documented in-service event or strain.

STEP 4

Decide whether to claim other joints as secondary.

How. If years of limping have hurt your knee, hip, or back, list each one. A condition caused or made worse by a service-connected condition can be service connected as secondary, but it needs a medical link.

If a provider will say the knee, hip, or back problem is at least as likely as not caused or made worse by the ankle, **then** claim it as secondary to the ankle. **If** no provider sees a link, **then** talk it over with a free accredited representative before you add it.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.310(a) and (b).

Done when you've listed any secondary joints you're claiming and the reason for each.

STEP 5

Get the medical opinion your path needs.

How. Ask a provider to state whether the ankle is at least as likely as not related to service and, for each secondary joint, whether it was caused or made worse by the ankle. VA may also get an opinion at your C&P exam.

Done when you have a written opinion for the ankle and each secondary joint, or you know VA will get one.

STEP 6

File the 21-526EZ, describe daily impact, and confirm it arrived.

How. Name the ankle and each secondary condition. In your statement, describe uneven ground, stairs, standing at work, and how often the ankle gives out. 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 is filed with a plain description of daily impact and you've confirmed VA has everything.

STEP 7

Get ready for the C&P exam VA schedules.

How. The examiner should measure motion with a goniometer, test for pain on active and passive motion and with and without weight on the leg, and compare the other ankle if it's undamaged. Let them test stability, and describe your flare-ups honestly: how often, how long, and what you can't do during one.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.59.

Done when you've gone to the exam ready to describe your flare-ups and limits in plain terms.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Filed an Intent to File and saved the confirmation.
- ☐ Documented current ankle motion and any instability or fused joint.
- ☐ Connected the ankle to a documented in-service injury or strain.
- ☐ Decided which knee, hip, or back conditions to claim as secondary.
- ☐ Got a medical opinion for the ankle and each secondary joint, or know VA will get one.
- ☐ Filed the 21-526EZ with real daily impact and confirmed VA has everything.
- ☐ Went to the C&P exam ready to describe my flare-ups and limits.

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.

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.