

— FWD ASSIST HQ —

FIELD GUIDE

Filing an IBS Claim

File an irritable bowel syndrome claim, including the Gulf War path for unexplained digestive 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.

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Companion to VA Secondary Claims Manual.

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 an irritable bowel syndrome claim on VA Form 21-526EZ on the path that fits: direct, secondary, or, for qualifying Gulf War veterans, presumptive.

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.
- ☐ A current IBS diagnosis or records of ongoing bowel symptoms.
- ☐ A symptom log covering at least the last three months: belly pain tied to bowel movements and the bowel changes that come with it.
- ☐ Your service history, including any service on or after August 2, 1990 in the Gulf region, Afghanistan, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, or Jordan.
- ☐ The name of any service-connected condition, or the medicine you take for it, that may cause or worsen your IBS.
- ☐ Your VA file number, if you have one.

When to start: Today. An Intent to File holds your potential start date for one year while you gather the rest.

Start Here: The Basics

Irritable bowel syndrome is a functional gastrointestinal disorder: real symptoms with no structural damage to explain them. VA rates it under Diagnostic Code 7319. Since May 19, 2024, the levels turn on how many days you've had belly pain tied to bowel movements over the last three months. You also need at least two of these: a change in how often you go, a change in stool form, straining or urgency, mucus, bloating, or a swollen feeling. IBS has a path most conditions don't. For a Persian Gulf veteran, IBS is a medically unexplained chronic multisymptom illness, and the law presumes it's connected to service. It can also be secondary to a service-connected condition or its medicine. This guide prints no percentages. See how IBS is rated at va.gov.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.114, DC 7319; 38 U.S.C. § 1117(a); 38 CFR § 3.317(a)(2); 38 CFR § 3.310.

The Steps

STEP 1

File an Intent to File.

How. Submit it online through 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.

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

Done when you have a confirmation saved.

STEP 2

Pick the path that fits your service.

How. Check each path. You can claim more than one.

If you served on or after August 2, 1990 in the Southwest Asia theater or in Afghanistan, Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, or Jordan, **then** look at the Gulf War path. The theater means Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and nearby waters. IBS that has lasted six months or more can be presumed connected to service. **If** a service-connected condition or its medicine caused your IBS, **then** claim it as secondary. **If** you had IBS before and a service-connected condition made it worse, **then** that's aggravation, and VA will need medical evidence of how bad it was before it got worse, or the earliest medical evidence from after it started getting worse. **If** it began and was treated in service, **then** claim it directly.

Where this is written down: 38 U.S.C. § 1117(f); 38 CFR § 3.317(a)(4) and (e); 38 CFR §§ 3.303 and 3.310(a), (b).

Done when you've chosen your path or paths.

STEP 3

Log your symptoms the way the rating criteria count them.

How. For at least three months, mark each day you have belly pain tied to a bowel movement. Note which of these come with it: going more or less often, a change in stool form, straining or urgency, mucus, bloating, or a swollen feeling. Note missed work too. Take the log to your provider so it gets into your medical record.

Done when you have a log that shows how many days a week or month the pain hits, and which bowel changes come with it.

STEP 4

Match your evidence to your path.

How. For the Gulf War path, your qualifying service and six months of documented symptoms carry the claim. No link opinion is required. For a direct or secondary claim, the file needs a medical opinion linking IBS to service or to the service-connected condition. VA usually gets that opinion at the exam, and you can also send one from your own provider.

If your doctor finds a structural cause, like Crohn's disease or colitis, **then** the Gulf War presumption for functional disorders doesn't cover it. Talk with an accredited representative about another path.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 3.317(a)(2)(i)(B)(3) and its Note; 38 CFR § 3.159(c)(4).

Done when your evidence fits the path you chose.

STEP 5

File the 21-526EZ and name the path.

How. List IBS and say how it's connected, for example "IBS, Gulf War service in Kuwait" or "IBS, secondary to service-connected PTSD."

If you already have another digestive rating, like ulcerative colitis or a bowel resection, **then** know that VA gives one rating for some groups of digestive codes instead of separate ones. Ask a representative how it would combine.

Where this is written down: 38 CFR § 4.114 (introductory text).

Done when the claim names IBS and your path.

STEP 6

Get ready for the exam.

How. Bring your log. Be ready to say how many days the pain hits, which bowel changes come with it, how urgency affects work and travel, and any weight change. Describe it as it really is. Don't play it down, and don't stretch it.

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 can describe how often, how bad, and what it keeps you from doing.

STEP 7

Submit and confirm.

How. File online at va.gov/disability/file-disability-claim-form-21-526ez and save the confirmation, or mail it with tracking to: Department of Veterans Affairs, Claims Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI 53547-4444. About 10 days later, check va.gov/claim-or-appeal-status or call 1-800-827-1000 to make sure everything is in your file.

Done when the claim is in and you've confirmed your documents are on file.

Recap Checklist

- ☐ Filed an Intent to File and saved the confirmation.
- ☐ Chose my path: Gulf War, secondary or aggravation, or direct.
- ☐ Logged pain days and bowel changes for at least three months.
- ☐ Matched my evidence to my path, with a medical link only where needed.
- ☐ Filed the 21-526EZ naming IBS and my path.
- ☐ Got ready to describe pain days, bowel changes, and daily impact at the exam.
- ☐ Submitted the claim and confirmed it's on file.

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 Secondary Claims Manual*. 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.