



Vet Claims Coach: Setting Yourself Up for Success

Before you file a VA disability claim, taking strategic steps can protect your financial interests and significantly strengthen your case. Follow this guide to prepare, build your evidence trail, and file effectively.

Step 1: Protect Your Claim (Check for Third-Party Agents)

Before doing anything else, ensure no unauthorized companies or individuals are attached to your VA file. If left unmanaged, certain aggressive third-party companies may attempt to invoice you for a claim that you won't even need their help to win.

- **Action:** Call the VA directly at 1-800-827-1000.
 - **Request:** Ask the representative to check for any existing Power of Attorney (POA), agents, or Points of Contact (POCs) on your file.
 - **Removal:** Request the immediate removal of any listed entities that you are not actively and intentionally working with.
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Step 2: Build Your Evidence Strategy

A successful claim relies on a solid medical strategy. Do not guess—plan the path of least resistance to your rating.

- **Identify Direct Claims (Primary):** Start with conditions that have clear, documented links to your active-duty service.
 - *Did you sustain a specific injury during service?*
 - *Do you suffer from service-related tinnitus?*
- **Leverage Secondary Claims:** If you already have a service-connected rating, consider what new conditions have been caused or aggravated by it.
 - *Examples:* Claiming depression secondary to chronic back pain, or radiculopathy secondary to a spinal issue.

Step 3: Secure Medical Documentation

Once you identify your target claims, you must establish a paper trail. The VA decides claims based on medical evidence, not just self-reports.

1. **Log In:** Go to [VA.gov](https://www.va.gov) and navigate to the My HealtheVet portal.
2. **Schedule Appointments:** Contact your local VA clinic to set up appointments. Explicitly request specialized visits tailored to your specific conditions, such as:
 - Mental Health evaluations
 - Sleep Studies (for sleep apnea)
 - Pain Management or Neurology visits (for spine and nerve issues)
3. **Be Transparent:** When attending these appointments, do not downplay your symptoms. Be completely honest and detailed about the severity of the issues you experience on your worst days.

Step 4: File the Claim Online

Only after you have established treatment and built your evidence trail should you officially submit your paperwork.

Navigating the Online Application:

- **The Launchpad:** Visit the [VA Disability Claims Page](https://www.va.gov/disability) and select "File a claim online" to begin VA Form 21-526EZ. ([www.VA.gov/disability](https://www.va.gov/disability))
- **Select Intent:** Confirm your current duty status, then select *"I'm filing a claim for a new condition or for a condition that's gotten worse."*
- **Adding Conditions:** Under the Conditions section, select *"A condition I haven't claimed before"* and enter your diagnoses (e.g., Sleep Apnea, IBS, Insomnia).

Tip: You can research potential rating percentages online beforehand to understand how the VA evaluates your specific conditions.

- **Establish Connection:** This is where you specify if a condition is Primary or Secondary. (e.g., *Linking Sleep Apnea as secondary to an existing spine rating*).

- **Provide Details & Statements:** Write a brief statement about how the condition affects you. (AI can assist you in drafting and refining this statement).
 - **Medical Facility Logs:** List the names and addresses of any private or VA facilities where you received treatment. The VA will use this information to request your records.
 - **Upload Supporting Documents:** Upload your Nexus letters, private medical records, and personal lay statements.
 - **Finalize:** Confirm your banking/direct deposit information, verify your employment status, and electronically sign the application by typing your full name.
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Pro-Tips for Success

Master the C&P Exam

After filing, you will likely be scheduled for a Compensation and Pension (C&P) exam. Study before you go. YouTube features highly detailed breakdowns of almost every specific C&P exam type. When answering the examiner's questions, always describe your symptoms as they manifest on your worst days. Avoid casual pleasantries like *"I'm feeling good today"*—focus entirely on how the condition limits your daily life.

Understand "VA Math"

Keep in mind that VA math is notoriously fuzzy; for example, getting a 50% rating and another 50% rating does not equal a 100% total disability rating. To find out what your combined ratings actually look like, use our free ratings calculator at www.VetClaimsCoach.net.

Utilize AI Assistance

Leverage AI to help you fine-tune your personal lay statements, articulate the daily impact of your conditions clearly, and brainstorm potential secondary conditions based on your current primary ratings.

Don't Give Up

The VA claims process is a marathon, not a sprint. Keep pushing forward, keep showing up to your medical appointments, and keep building your evidence trail. You earned these benefits.

You can do this, and the Vet Claims Coach is here to help!