



Essential Veteran Services

EVALUATIONS & NEXUS LETTERS

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Filing Without a Coach

A Veteran's Step-by-Step VA Claim Guide

A step-by-step walkthrough for Veterans filing claims on their own.

01 VA.gov Account

02 Intent to File

03 File Your Claim

04 Rating Increase

This guide does not replace medical or legal advice. It is an educational resource to help you navigate VA.gov with clarity.

Filing a VA Claim Can Feel Overwhelming

The system is structured, but not always intuitive.

This guide walks you through:

01

**Creating your
VA.gov account**

02

**Submitting an
Intent to File**

03

**Filing your
claim**

04

**Requesting a
rating increase**

How to use this guide

Each step has its own page, and the four steps above are links. Work in order the first time through; afterwards, jump straight to the page you need.

A note on this guide

This guide does not replace medical or legal advice. It is an educational resource to help you navigate VA.gov with clarity.

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Take this one step at a time. You do not have to complete everything in one sitting.

Step 1: Create (or Log Into) Your VA.gov Account

The screenshot shows the VA.gov homepage. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the VA.gov logo and two buttons: 'Sign in' (labeled 1) and 'Create account' (labeled 2). Below the navigation bar is a large welcome message: 'Welcome to VA.gov — Let us help you get started'. The message states: 'Whether you're a Veteran, service member, or family member, we're here to help you get the care and benefits you deserve.' Below the welcome message are three columns of information:

- What You'll Need**
 - SSN
 - Email address
 - Phone number
 - Access to ID.me or Login.gov
- Step-by-Step**
 - 01 Go to VA.gov
 - 02 Click "Sign In" or "Create Account"
 - 03 Choose Login.gov or ID.me to verify identity
 - 04 Confirm contact information
 - 05 Access your dashboard
- Common Mistakes to Avoid**
 - Using an outdated email
 - Not completing identity verification fully
 - Creating duplicate accounts

WHAT COMES NEXT

Once your account is active, the next step is protecting your effective date with an Intent to File.

Step 2: Submit an Intent to File (ITF)

FROM VA.GOV

Should I submit an intent to file form?

If you plan to file for disability compensation using a paper form, you may want to submit an intent to file form first. This can give you the time you need to gather your evidence while avoiding a later potential start date (also called an effective date). When you notify us of your intent to file, you may be able to get retroactive payments (compensation that starts at a point in the past).

Note: If you file for disability compensation online, then you don't need to notify us of your intent to file. This is because your effective date gets set automatically when you start filling out the form online—before you submit it.

What Is an Intent to File?

An Intent to File tells the VA you plan to submit a claim and preserves your effective date for up to 12 months.

Why It Matters

If approved, your back pay can be calculated from the ITF date, not the date you finish your full claim.

Step-by-Step

- 01 Navigate to "File a Disability Claim"
- 02 Select "Start a new claim"
- 03 Choose Intent to File option
- 04 Submit confirmation
- 05 Download/save confirmation screen

PRO TIP *Screenshot or download confirmation immediately.*

FROM VA.GOV

Claims you can file after filling out this form

After you complete this form, we'll direct you to one or more of these benefit applications for you to complete:

Disability compensation claim (VA Form 21-526EZ).

Note: If you start your disability claim online now, you don't need to fill out this intent to file form. When you start your disability application or Supplemental Claim online, it notifies us automatically of your intent to file.

Step 3: Prepare Before Submitting Your Claim

Before you click “Submit Claim,” make sure you have:

- ☐ Diagnosis
- ☐ Nexus letter (if needed)
- ☐ Service connection explanation
- ☐ Supporting medical records
- ☐ Personal statement (if applicable)

REMINDER: THE VA DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY CONNECT THE DOTS. YOUR JOB IS TO CLEARLY SHOW:

01

**A current
condition**

02

**An in-service event
or exposure**

03

**A medical link
between the two**

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NOTES:

Step 3: Award Letter Examples

Two sample VA letters, shown with placeholder details (“John Michael Doe”), so you know what to expect and what each section means.



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

810 Vermont Ave NW · Washington, D.C. 20420

July 1, 2021
John Michael Doe
5445 Honor Street
Hope, AR 71802

In Reply Refer to:
xxx-xx-4321
27/eBenefits

Dear Mr. Doe,

This letter is a summary of benefits you currently receive from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Please safeguard this important document. This letter is considered an official record of your VA entitlement. Our records contain the following information:

PERSONAL CLAIM INFORMATION

Your VA claim number is: xxx-xx-4321
You are the Veteran.

MILITARY INFORMATION

Army · Honorable Sep 17, 1990 – Jun 22, 1996
Army · Honorable Jun 23, 1999 – May 5, 2005

VA BENEFIT INFORMATION

You have one or more service-connected disabilities: Yes
Your combined service-connected evaluation is: 100%
Your current monthly award amount is: \$4268.39
The effective date of the last change to your current award was: January 1, 2021

You are considered to be totally and permanently disabled due solely to your service-connected disabilities: Yes

The effective date of when you became totally and permanently disabled due to your service-connected disabilities: December 15, 2004

EXAMPLE A • BENEFIT SUMMARY LETTER



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

810 Vermont Ave NW · Washington, D.C. 20420

July 1, 2021
John Michael Doe
5445 Honor Street
Hope, AR 71802

In Reply Refer to:
xxx-xx-4321
27/eBenefits

Dear Mr. Doe,

This letter certifies that John Michael Doe is receiving service-connected disability compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The current benefit paid is as follows:

CURRENT BENEFIT

Gross Benefit Amount	\$4268.39
Net Amount Paid	\$4268.39
Effective Date	January 1, 2021
Combined Evaluation	100 percent

HOW YOU CAN CONTACT US

Visit www.va.gov, call 1-800-827-1000 (TDD 1-800-829-4833), or ask a question at iris.custhelp.va.gov.

Cheryl J. Rawls

Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations, Office of Outreach and Stakeholder Engagement

EXAMPLE B • BENEFIT VERIFICATION LETTER

Step 4: Submit Your Disability Claim on VA.gov

Before you start...

- 01** Put all your documents in one folder on your computer/phone.
- 02** Rename files so they're easy to identify (examples):
 - 03** PTSD_NexusLetter_DrSmith_2026.pdf
 - 04** Migraines_MedicalRecords_2022-2025.pdf
 - 05** BuddyStatement_SgtJones.pdf
- 06** Keep files in accepted formats and under size limits if possible (VA claim status tool accepts PDF, GIF, JPEG, BMP, TXT and max 25 MB per file).

A) Start the online application

- 01** Go to VA.gov and Sign in (Login.gov or ID.me)
- 02** Navigate to the Disability section.
- 03** Choose the option to File for disability compensation (the online application is tied to VA Form 21-526EZ).
- 04** Click Start your application / File a claim online.

GOOD TO KNOW

If you don't have everything ready: you can save and come back later. Even if you do not complete an "Intent to File," the VA recognizes the date you started as your date of claim as long as you complete within 365 days.

NOTES:

Step 4: Work Through the Application Sections

Veteran information

- Confirm your personal info (name, DOB, contact info)
- Confirm/update your mailing address, phone, and email

Service details

- Confirm branch, dates of service, and discharge status (as prompted)
- If asked about National Guard/Reserve or deployments, answer as accurately as you can

Claim type / what you're filing

You may see options like:

- New condition (original/new claim)
- Secondary condition (caused/worsened by another service-connected condition)
- Increase (for a condition already rated)

Select what applies and, if you're unsure, choose the option closest to your situation and explain clearly in your statements.

Add your conditions (THE BIG ONE!!!)

- Click Add a new condition
- Enter the condition name (example: "migraines," "PTSD," "knee pain/strain," etc.)
- Repeat until you've listed everything you intend to claim

TIP *If you have multiple conditions, add them all in one session if possible. It's easier than trying to "patch" it later.*

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Treatment information

- You may be asked where you've received care (VA, private providers, hospitals)
- Enter provider names, locations, and approximate dates if you have them
- If you don't remember exact dates, use best estimates

Direct deposit

- Enter or confirm bank routing/account numbers (if prompted)
- Double-check this carefully

Step 4: Upload, Review, and Submit

C) Upload your evidence (documents)

- 01** When you reach the evidence upload section, click Add files/Upload documents
- 02** Upload documents one at a time (or in batches if the system allows)
- 03** For each upload, choose the best matching document type/category if VA.gov asks you to label it
- 04** Confirm each upload shows as successfully added before continuing

IF A FILE WON'T UPLOAD:

- Convert it to PDF if it isn't already
- Reduce file size (25MB/file is a common limit in VA upload tools).
- Try uploading fewer files at once

D) Review and submit

- 01** Use the Review page to confirm:
 - 02** All conditions are listed correctly
 - 03** Evidence is attached
 - 04** Contact info is correct
- 05** Check the certification/attestation boxes (truthfulness statement)
- 06** Click Submit

E) After submission (do these immediately)

- 01** Save your confirmation page (download, screenshot, or print)
- 02** Check that your claim shows in the Claim status tool
- 03** If you need to add more evidence later, you can usually upload additional evidence through the claim status tool under the Files tab ("Additional evidence" → Add Files)

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Self-Filer Checklist

Nine boxes between you and a submitted claim. Check them off as you go.

☐ VA.gov account created☐ Identity verified☐ Intent to File submitted☐ ITF confirmation saved☐ Diagnosis confirmed☐ Nexus letter secured☐ Medical records organized☐ Claim submitted☐ Confirmation saved

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DATES, CONFIRMATION NUMBERS, AND NOTES:

Requesting a Rating Increase

An increase is for a condition the VA has already rated as service-connected that has gotten worse (you'll need updated medical evidence).

A) Gather “worsening” evidence first

- New medical records
- New test results/imaging
- Provider notes documenting worsening symptoms
- A personal statement describing what has changed

B) Start the increase request on VA.gov

- 01 Sign in to VA.gov
- 02 Go to Disability
- 03 Choose File for disability compensation (same entry point as filing)
- 04 When asked what you're filing for, select Increase (wording may look like “increased claim” or “request an increase”)

C) Select the condition

- 01 Choose the already-rated condition from your list (example: “PTSD,” “knee condition,” etc.)
- 02 Confirm you're requesting an increase because symptoms have worsened

D) Upload updated evidence

- Upload your new evidence (the “worsening” proof)
- Label files clearly and confirm each upload completes successfully

E) Review, submit, then track

- Certify/attest, click Submit, and save the confirmation page
- Track progress in the Claim status tool; if VA requests a C&P exam, attend it

COMPANION GUIDE

The full walkthrough — selecting the condition, uploading updated evidence, reviewing, and what to do after submitting — is in the companion guide “Requesting an Increase Without a Coach.”

NEXT STEPS

If You Need Support

You Don't Have to Navigate This Alone.

Filing alone is possible. Filing strategically requires documentation.

If:

Your claim was denied

You're unsure about your nexus letter

You're preparing for an increase

You want professional review before submitting

Essential Veteran Services can help.

CONNECT WITH US TODAY



EMAIL

info@essentialveteranservices.com



PHONE

(469) 240-9353



WEBSITE

essentialveteranservices.com

[Book an Evaluation](#)



Veteran in crisis, or worried about one? Free, confidential support, 24/7.

[Call 988, then press 1](#) · [Text 838255](#) · VeteransCrisisLine.net



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