

Flow Process of a VA Original Claim

Detailed step-by-step guide for an original VA disability compensation claim





Learning objectives

By the end, learners should be able to explain each major step and what the claimant should do.

1

Identify the claim type

Define an original disability claim and separate it from supplemental, increased-rating, secondary, and appeal/review actions.

Start with the right lane

2

Build the package

Explain the evidence needed for service connection: current disability, in-service event/injury/disease, and a link between the two.

Evidence drives the decision

3

Track the process

Follow VA's post-filing status steps: claim received, initial review, evidence gathering, evidence review, rating, decision letter, final review, and claim decided.

Expect possible evidence loops



The original claim journey: big-picture flow

A VA original claim moves from preparation to VA review to a decision. Some steps can loop back if more evidence is needed.



Before VA receives the claim

Confirm eligibility and claim type
Gather service, medical, and lay evidence
Decide whether to file as FDC or standard claim

After VA receives the claim

VA reviews basic completeness
VA gathers and reviews evidence
VA may schedule C&P exams or medical opinions

Decision and follow-up

VA issues decision letter and rating
Review effective date and payment information
Use decision review options if disagreeing

Important process behavior

The claim can move backward to evidence gathering if VA needs more information or if the claimant submits evidence later in the process.



Step 1 — Confirm this is an original claim

An original claim is the first VA disability benefits claim filed for a condition/benefit issue.

A What makes it “original”?

It is the first claim filed for disability compensation for the condition/issue. VA decides whether the condition is service connected and, if granted, assigns a disability rating and effective date. Do not confuse it with a supplemental claim, increased-rating claim, or decision review/appeal.

Plain-English framing

The veteran is asking VA to decide, for the first time, whether a current disability is connected to qualifying military service.

B Three service-connection building blocks

1

Current disability

A diagnosed or documented physical or mental condition.

2

In-service event

An injury, illness, event, exposure, or aggravation during service.

3

Nexus / link

Medical or lay evidence connecting the current disability to service.

Best practice

Before filing, list each claimed condition and match it to records or statements that support these three elements.



Step 2 — Consider an Intent to File (optional)

An Intent to File can preserve a potential effective date while the claimant gathers evidence.

1 Purpose

It tells VA the claimant plans to file. If the completed claim is filed within 1 year, the intent-to-file date may become the effective date for awarded benefits.

Potential retroactive benefits

2 When it matters

Most useful when filing by paper and needing more time.
For online claims, VA says the effective date is set automatically when starting the online form before submission.
The completed claim must be filed within 1 year.

3 Output

A saved place in line for the potential start date of benefits — not the final claim itself.

Instructor note

Intent to File does not replace VA Form 21-526EZ. It only preserves a possible effective date if the formal claim is filed timely.



Step 3 — Gather and organize supporting evidence

VA reviews all available evidence to decide eligibility and assign a rating.

1

Service documents

DD214 or other separation documents; service treatment records; personnel records if relevant.

2

Medical evidence

VA records, private treatment records, doctor reports, X-rays, lab results, hospital records, and DBQs when useful.

3

Lay evidence

Veteran statements and buddy statements from people who observed the event, symptoms, onset, or impact.

4

Claim-specific forms

Some issues require extra forms or releases, such as authorizations for private medical records.

Organization tip

Create one folder per claimed condition. Put the condition name, diagnosis/current symptoms, in-service event, nexus evidence, and severity evidence in each folder.

[1][2]



Step 4 — Choose the filing path: Fully Developed Claim or Standard Claim

Both are valid. The difference is mainly who gathers evidence and when evidence is submitted.

Fully Developed Claim (FDC)

Claimant submits VA Form 21-526EZ and all evidence available at the same same time.

Claimant certifies there is no more evidence VA needs to decide the claim.

Claimant still attends VA exams if VA schedules them.

If more non-federal evidence is needed, VA may remove it from FDC and process as standard.

Best when evidence package is ready

Standard Claim

VA takes more responsibility for gathering evidence needed to decide the claim. the claim.

Claimant identifies private/non-federal records and gives VA permission to request them.

Claimant still responds to requests and attends any scheduled exams.

Usually slower because VA must spend time developing the evidence.

Best when VA help is needed to collect records



Step 5 — File the claim on VA Form 21-526EZ

The formal claim starts VA’s review. Complete and accurate information reduces delays.

1 Core form

Application for Disability Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits (VA Form 21-526EZ).

List each condition clearly.
Attach or identify evidence.
Include direct deposit/contact details.
Sign and submit.

2 Ways to file

Online through VA.gov

By mail to the Claims Intake Center

In person at a VA regional office

By fax

With help from an accredited attorney, claims agent, or VSO representative

3 Submission check

Make sure the claim is complete before submitting.
Upload or attach evidence at the end if filing online.
Keep a copy of everything submitted.
Track the claim status after filing.

Avoidable delay

A missing name, Social Security number, signature, condition description, or contact information can slow the initial review.



VA Step 1 — Claim received

VA confirms the claim has entered its system.

1

What VA does

VA receives the claim in its system.

If filed online, VA provides an on-screen confirmation after submission.

If mailed, VA sends a letter confirming receipt, generally about 1 week plus mailing time after VA receives it.

2

What the claimant should do

Save confirmation pages, upload receipts, mailing proof, or fax confirmation.

Check claim status online after submission.

Do not submit duplicate claims unless there is a specific reason.

Output of this step

Claim is now in the VA workflow and will move to initial review.



VA Step 2 — Initial review

VA checks whether the claim has basic information needed to start development.

1 VA checks the basics

Identity information such as name and Social Security number.
Claim type and claimed condition(s).
Whether forms, signatures, and authorizations are present.
Whether VA needs more information from the claimant.

2 Claimant action

Respond quickly if VA sends a letter asking for missing information.
Update address, phone, email, and direct deposit information if needed.
Make sure a representative, if any, has proper authorization on file.

Common classroom example

If VA cannot verify identity or does not know what condition is being claimed, the claim may stall until the missing information is supplied.



VA Step 3 — Evidence gathering

This is usually the longest part of the VA disability claim process.

1 VA may gather

- VA records
- Service records
- Federal records
- Private records, with authorization
- Medical opinions or claim exams

2 VA may ask you to

- Submit evidence
- Sign release forms
- Attend a C&P exam
- Clarify claimed conditions
- Provide lay statements

3 Decision point

If evidence is complete, the claim can move forward. If evidence is missing or new evidence is submitted later, the claim can loop back to evidence gathering.

Key habit

Read VA letters carefully. Most delays happen when VA is waiting on evidence, forms, authorizations, or examination attendance.



Special branch — VA claim exam / C&P exam

VA may schedule an exam when more medical information is needed to decide or rate the claim.

Why VA schedules it

To determine whether the disability is service service connected.
To determine the severity of the disability for rating purposes.
Not everyone needs a claim exam if existing evidence is sufficient.

ACE process

If the record already has enough medical evidence, VA may review the file instead of scheduling an in-person exam.

Claimant actions

Keep contact information current.
Confirm the appointment when contacted.
Attend the exam or reschedule as allowed.
Be clear, honest, and specific about symptoms and limitations.

Do not miss it

VA specifically tells claimants not to miss scheduled exams while waiting on a decision. Missing an exam can create delays and may affect the evidence available for the decision.



VA Step 4 — Evidence review

VA reviews the assembled record to see whether the evidence is ready for rating.

Evidence review answers three questions:

1

Is the record complete enough?

Are service, medical, lay, exam, and private records in the file?

2

Does the evidence address service connection?

Current disability + in-service event + nexus/link.

3

Does the evidence show severity?

Symptoms, frequency, treatment, functional loss, and rating criteria evidence.

Loop-back rule

If VA needs more evidence or the claimant submits more evidence, the claim may return to evidence gathering before rating.



VA Step 5 — Rating decision

VA decides the claim and determines the disability rating if benefits are granted.

Issue-by-issue decision

Each claimed condition may be granted, denied, or deferred.
VA considers all evidence in the record.
A deferred issue means VA needs more development before deciding that issue.

Rating percentage

If granted, VA assigns a disability rating based on severity.
The rating affects monthly compensation.
Multiple ratings may be combined under VA rules.

Effective date

The decision letter states when payments start.
Intent-to-file or online-start dates may matter.
Review the effective date carefully.

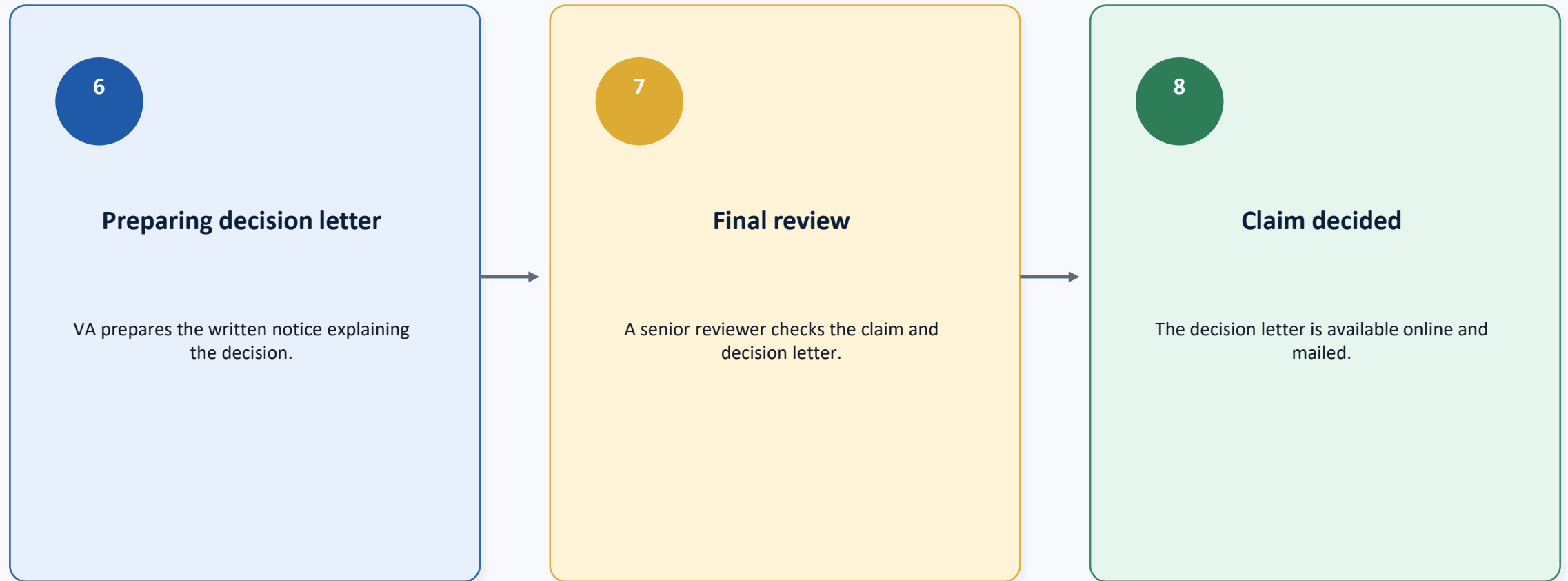
Important

The rating step may still go back to evidence gathering if VA needs more information or receives additional evidence.



VA Steps 6–8 — Decision letter, final review, claim decided

Once VA makes the decision, it prepares the letter and completes the claim.



What the letter includes if benefits are awarded

Disability rating, monthly payment amount, and date payments will start. VA says mailed decision letters should arrive within 10 business days, though it may take longer.



Step after decision — Read the decision letter carefully

The letter explains what VA decided, why, and what to do next.

Check the outcome

Granted, denied, deferred, or partially granted
granted
Each condition separately
Reasons and evidence considered

Check the award

Rating percentage(s)
Combined rating
Monthly amount
Payment start date / effective date

Check deadlines

Date on decision letter
Decision review rights
Evidence needed if denied
Representative contact

Practical tip

Build a “decision review worksheet”: list each issue, outcome, rating, effective date, reason for denial if any, and the next action.



If the claimant disagrees — Choose a decision review option

For decisions under the modern review system, VA offers three main review lanes.

S Supplemental Claim

Use when you have new and relevant evidence that VA did not review before. File VA Form 20-0995 or use available online tools where applicable.

New evidence lane

H Higher-Level Review

Use when you believe VA made an error or a different interpretation is warranted. A higher-level reviewer looks at the existing record; no new evidence is allowed.

No new evidence

B Board Appeal

Use when you want a Veterans Law Judge at the Board of Veterans' Appeals to review the issue. Board options include direct review, evidence submission, or hearing.

Judge review lane

Deadline reminder

For Higher-Level Reviews and Board Appeals, VA generally lists a 1-year deadline from the date on the decision letter. Review the decision notice for exact rights and deadlines.

[8][9]



Claimant checklist: keep the claim moving

Use this as a quick process-control tool before, during, and after filing.

Before filing

- Confirm claim type and eligibility.
- Submit Intent to File if needed.
- List every claimed condition separately.
- Build evidence by condition.

At filing

- Use VA Form 21-526EZ.
- Submit/identify all relevant evidence.
- Keep proof of filing.
- Verify contact and bank information.

While pending

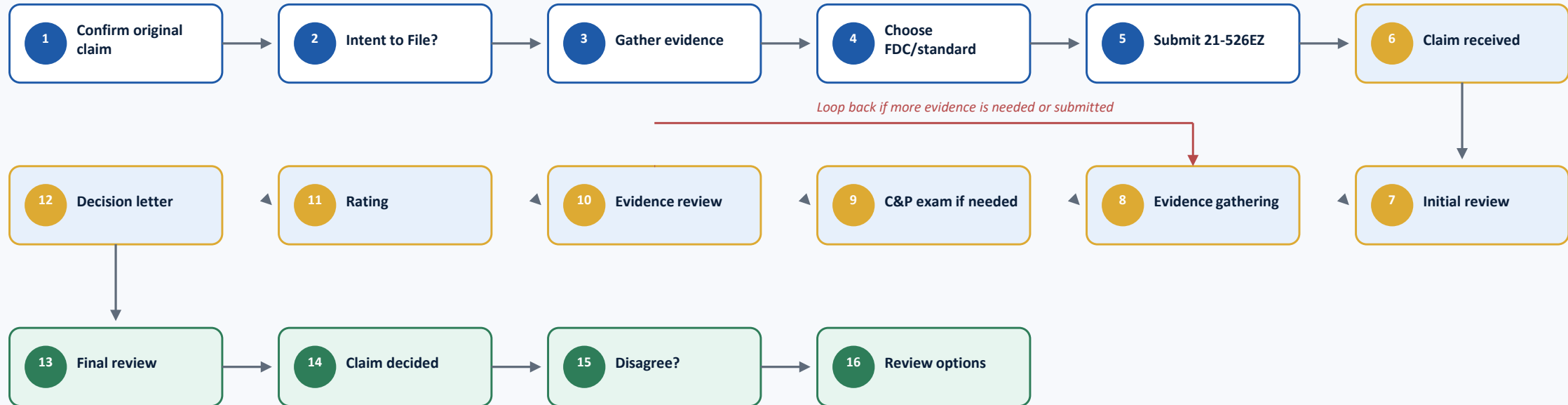
- Check claim status.
- Open and respond to VA letters.
- Attend C&P exams.
- Upload evidence only when needed.

After decision

- Download decision letter.
- Review each issue, rating, and date.
- Start payments/dependent actions if granted.
- Select review option if disagreeing.

Appendix: detailed flow process

Use this one-slide map for classroom review or handout discussion.



Process note

VA's public status page currently shows eight disability claim statuses. This deck adds preparation steps before VA receives the claim and next-step options after decision.



Sources and reference pages

Official VA.gov sources used to build this deck.

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|-----|--|---|
| [1] | VA.gov — How to file a VA disability claim | https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/ |
| [2] | VA.gov — Evidence needed for your disability claim | https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/evidence-needed/ |
| [3] | VA.gov — The VA claim process after you file your claim | https://www.va.gov/disability/after-you-file-claim/ |
| [4] | VA.gov — What your claim status means | https://www.va.gov/resources/what-your-claim-status-means/ |
| [5] | VA.gov — VA claim exam (C&P exam) | https://www.va.gov/resources/va-claim-exam/ |
| [6] | VA.gov — Fully Developed Claims program | https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/evidence-needed/fully-developed-claims/ |
| [7] | VA.gov — Standard disability claims | https://www.va.gov/disability/how-to-file-claim/evidence-needed/standard-claims/ |
| [8] | VA.gov — VA decision reviews and appeals | https://www.va.gov/decision-reviews/ |
| [9] | VA.gov — Higher-Level Reviews | https://www.va.gov/decision-reviews/higher-level-review/ |

Currency note

VA guidance and forms can change. Confirm current forms, addresses, and review deadlines on VA.gov before filing or teaching a live case.