

**VA UPDATES DISABILITY RATING SCHEDULE FOR INFECTIOUS DISEASES,
IMMUNE DISORDERS AND NUTRITIONAL DEFICIENCIES**

As of August 11, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) updated portions of the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD or Rating Schedule) that evaluate infectious diseases, immune disorders and nutritional deficiencies. The collection of federal regulations used by the Veterans Benefits Administration helps claims processors evaluate the severity of disabilities and assign disability ratings.

“VA is in the process of updating all 15 body systems of the VASRD to more accurately reflect modern medicine and provide Veterans with clearer rating decisions,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “By updating the rating schedule, veterans receive decisions based on the most current medical knowledge of their condition.”

Claims pending prior to August 11, will be considered under both the old and new rating criteria, and whichever criteria is more favorable to a veteran will be applied. Claims filed since August 11 are now rated under the new rating schedule.

Updating the rating schedule for conditions related to infectious diseases, immune disorders and nutritional deficiencies, enables VA claims processors to make more consistent decisions with greater ease and ensure veterans understand these decisions. VA says it remains committed to improving its service to veterans continuously and staying at the forefront of modern medicine as it has for decades.

The following are updates for chronic fatigue syndrome.

§4.88a chronic fatigue syndrome.

(A)For VA purposes, the diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome requires:

- (1) New onset of debilitating fatigue severe enough to reduce daily activity to less than 50 percent of the usual level for at least six months; and
- (2) The exclusion, by history, physical examination and laboratory tests, of all other clinical conditions that may produce similar symptoms; and
- (3) Six or more of the following:
 - a. Acute onset of the condition,
 - b. Low grade fever,
 - c. Nonexudative pharyngitis,
 - d. Palpable or tender cervical or axillary lymph nodes,
 - e. Generalized muscle aches or weakness,

- f. Fatigue lasting 24 hours or longer after exercise,
- g. Headaches (of a type, severity, or pattern that is different from headaches in the premorbid state),
- h. Migratory joint pains,
- i. Neuropsychologic symptoms,
- j. Sleep disturbance.

Other health issues affected by these changes include:

- Asiatic cholera
- Visceral leishmaniasis
- Leprosy
- Malaria
- Lymphatic Filariasis
- Bartonellosis
- Plague
- Relapsing fever
- Rheumatic fever
- Syphilis
- Military tuberculosis
- Avitaminosis
- Beriberi
- Pellagra
- Brucellosis
- Typhus
- Melioidosis
- Lyme disease
- Other parasitic diseases
- Systemic lupus erythematosus
- HIV-related illness
- Chronic fatigue syndrome

Under the VA changes, most of the above illnesses have a 100 rating under certain conditions such as active disease state.

According to the VA, since 2017 they have updated schedules for dental and oral health concerns endocrine system conditions, gynecological conditions, breast disorders, eye diseases, skin conditions, hematologic and lymphatic system issues.

VA RELEASES LAUNCHPAD APP TO STREAMLINE HEALTH CARE ACCESS FOR VETERANS AND CAREGIVERS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently launched a new mobile application designed to save veterans and their caregivers time on online. The objective is to bring telehealth tools to an app so veterans get faster service. VA Launchpad for Veterans simplifies and organizes several existing tools and resources into one convenient location to help manage health care needs.

“VA has developed dozens of apps for veterans to take charge of their health care.” Said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “VA Launchpad makes it easier to have these important tools available at your fingertips.” VA Launchpad arranges all of VA’s apps into five categories for veterans: health management, health care team communication, vital health information sharing, mental health improvement and quality of life improvement. The new app enables veterans to access all the features with a single secure login.

The app also includes many mental health care and personal improvement tools for individuals who are not enrolled in VA health care services. These tools are free and do not require secure logins to use.

VA Launchpad for Veterans is available for download in the Apple App Store and Google Play.

To access VA’s secure apps within VA Launchpad, users must be a VA patient and have one of the following accounts:

Premium My HealtheVet;

DS Logon Level 2 (Premium); or

ID.me.

VA AWARDS CONTRACT FOR REGION 4 OF COMMUNITY CARE NETWORK
TO INCREASE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE FOR VETERANS

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) awarded a contract August 6 to TriWest Healthcare Alliance to serve as Third Party Administrator in managing Region 4 of VA's new Community Care Network (CCN). The Community Care Network is the department's direct link with community providers to hopefully ensure VA provides the right care at the right time to veterans.

Region 4 includes VA medical centers in Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

"This contract award reflects our ongoing commitment to increasing veterans' access to care," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "As Part of VA's modernization efforts, we designed the new network based on feedback from veterans and other stakeholders, along with lessons learned from the Veterans Choice Program. We are confident that CCN will greatly improve customer service for veterans and timeliness of payments to community providers."

CCN will be the standard contract vehicle that allows VA to provide access to care for veterans from community health care providers using industry-standard approaches and guidelines. Until CCN is fully-implemented nationwide, TriWest Healthcare Alliance will continue to support veteran community care through its community provider network.

Regions 1, 2 and 3 of VA's new Community Care Network (CCN) were previously awarded December 28, 2018 OPTUM Public Sector Solutions, Inc. Contract award for Regions 5 and 6 are expected by end of calendar year 2019.

MILITARY RETIREES MIGHT NOT HAVE TO WAIT 180 DAYS TO START A DOD JOB ANYMORE

Some are pushing for changes to a law that requires military retirees to wait for 180 days after they leave the military before they can start a civilian job at the Defense Department. According to some lawmakers who are proponents of the law change, the waiting period is making it challenging for the DoD to get the best and most qualified people in government positions because retirees often opt to go with careers in these private sectors instead of waiting for 180 days.

“The 180-day rule creates a road block for veterans who want to continue to serve their country in retirement,” said Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., who is one of the sponsors of a bill that would repeal the law. “Our bill puts in place common-sense protections to prevent unscrupulous hiring practices but ensures when we find the right person for an important DoD job, they can come on board as soon as possible.”

The current law was originally enacted in 1964 and the 180-day waiting period was meant to prevent a revolving door of hiring at the DoD. After September 11, 2001, the law was waived, but reinstated in 2017. When the waiting requirements was suspended between 2001 and 2014, there were more than 41,000 retired service members who were able to begin government jobs without waiting 180 days.

There was a survey done by the United States Merit Systems Protection Board that did find some issues with the hiring of servicemembers without the waiting period. For example, the survey indicated one problem was inappropriate favoritism towards veterans.

The bill introduced in the Senate does address some of the concerns. For example, the law would mandate that positions in the DoD can't be left open for someone retiring. It also specifies that specific job requirements can't offer an advantage of any kind to the service member. Under the proposed legislation, the servicemember has to go through the same civil service procedures and process as any other applicant would for the position.

“This legislation solves an unnecessary hiring hurdle and ensures the most qualified individuals are placed in jobs, while also safeguarding our federal hiring practice that are in place,” Sen. Lankford said.

The bill was introduced by Lankford, Sens. Mike Lee, R-Utah; Mitt Romney, R-Utah; Johnny Isakson, R-Ga; and David Perdue, R-Ga. They also say that in addition to this bill, there is companion legislation that has been introduced in the House.

“I look forward to our bill’s full consideration in the days ahead so our qualified veterans can get to work and use their military expertise and background to continue their support of our defense missions and national security,” Lankford said.

TREATMENT COURT FOR VETERANS TO LAUNCH IN WEST VIRGINIA

A court for military veterans and active servicemembers is being launched in West Virginia. State Supreme Court justices are going to launch the program at the Brooke County Courthouse in Wellsburg.

The creation of the veterans' court is part of a bill introduced earlier this year, and according to the Supreme Court in the state, it will be part of the existing drug court program in the state. Participants have to be charged with criminal offenses related to their military service like mental health disorders and addiction, and then treatment can be based on their needs.

According to Brooke County Republican Sen. Ryan Weld, who is an attorney and former prosecutor, the veterans' court will focus on rehabilitation instead of incarceration and give veterans a second chance.

MILLIONS WILL BE ALLOWED TO SHOP ON MILITARY BASES SOON,
BUT THEY ARE UNSURE HOW THEY WILL GET ACCESS

According to defense officials, an estimated three million more people will be able to shop at on-base military stores soon. However, some veterans are not sure if they'll be able to use their benefits.

A recent report from the Military Times indicated veterans are concerned that they won't have access to the store because they don't have the required credential which is the Veteran Health Identification Card or VHIC, which is issued by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Currently, there are no specific answers available to veterans yet.

Under a law passed in 2018, the following are eligible to shop at commissaries and exchanges starting January 1:

- Purple Heart recipients
- Former prisoners of war
- Veterans with a service-connected disability from 0 – 90% as documented by the VA
- Certain primary veteran caregivers

It applies to all military bases including the Coast Guard.

The newly eligible individuals will be able to use certain facilities as well. The plans have been something the VA and Defense and Homeland security have been working on for four months, as far as implementation. However, access is a big issue because most veterans who are required don't have installation access.

The Military Times said the following:

Defense officials are working to enable technology at the front gate to scan those veteran cards so veterans can get in to use those benefits. Commissary officials are working on adjusting their technology to enable systems to read the cards.

Some veterans have said they are eligible for the new benefits because of their disability rating, but don't qualify for the VHIC, for various reasons. One veteran said she has tried to get answers from VA about what she can do to be able to shop but has been unsuccessful. "I hope the VA and DoD will work together to ensure that no veterans with a service-connected disability are overlooked on this benefit," said the veteran who asked to remain anonymous.

"The VHIC is the only credential that DoD resale and MWR facilities will accept from veterans authorized privileges solely under the Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018," said DoD spokeswoman Jessica Maxwell. "Specific questions about who can and how to

obtain a VHIC should be directed to the Department of Veterans Affairs.” The VA has said DoD is in charge of the expansion of the benefit.

For veteran caregivers who are eligible under the changes, the process will be different. These people aren’t directly associated with the DoD or VA so the VA will post a memo to VA.gov for caregivers. The memo can then be used at the front gate with an authorized form of ID and later the VA plans to transition to a caregiver ID card that can be scanned at the gate.

VA IS INCREASING RESEARCH EFFORTS RELATED TO AIRBORNE HAZARDS AND BURN PIT EXPOSURE

The VA recently announced the establishment of the Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE), which they say is part of their ongoing efforts to help improve health care for veterans.

“VA is addressing veterans concerns about the health effects of airborne hazards and burn pit exposure,” said VA secretary Robert Wilkie. “Establishing this program through the center is a testament to that and we will continue to collaborate with outside partners to ensure its ongoing success.”

The AHBPCE, located at the New Jersey War Related Illness and Injury Study Center, will specialize in clinical and translational research related to airborne hazards and burn pit exposure. The New center, which formally began operations in May 2019, will initially focus on:

- Expanding the understanding of health outcomes and treatments with intensive clinical research to support veterans possible affected by open burn pits and airborne hazards.
- VA providers can consult with AHBPCE for guidance relating to the assessment and treatment of veterans enrolled in VA healthcare with airborne hazard and burn pit exposure. Veterans may be invited for multi-day, comprehensive health evaluations from specialized teams. Referrals can be done for complex clinical presentations that couldn't be diagnosed or if it's not possible to develop a medical management plan locally.
- Veterans receiving VA-authorized care in the community may be referred for consultation or an examination for the same clinical reasons.
- Enhancing training and education initiatives to build and expand a network of clinicians who are specialized.
- Analyzing Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit registry data to monitor the VA's clinical response to exposure concerns.

Other information from the VA includes the following:

The Airborne Hazards Center of Excellence at the New Jersey War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (NJ WRIISC), established in 2013, was officially recognized by Congress and the President in Public Law 115—929 as a VA Center of Excellence. Designated as the Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) in May 2019, the Center conducts clinical and translational research related to airborne hazards and burn pits. It also actively develops and delivers new educational content related to airborne hazards and burn pits for healthcare providers, veterans and other stakeholders.

The AHBPCE recently launched the AWARE program that is specifically designed for veterans who:

- Completed the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry (AHOBPR) online questionnaire,
- Indicated a desire for an in-person AHOBPR exam,
- Reported chronic respiratory symptoms, and
- Meet other eligibility criteria.

The AWARE program will reach out to 'AHOBPR participants with high priority conditions and unexplained shortness of breath or decreased exercise tolerance to receive an evaluation at the NJ WRIISC. This clinical evaluation will inform the diagnosis and treatment of the individual veteran and will better characterize the range of problems experienced by deployed veterans to further medical knowledge and develop best practices.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARKINSON'S DISEASE AND AGENT ORANGE

Veterans who develop Parkinson's disease and were exposed to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service do not have to prove a connection between their disease and service to be eligible to receive VA health care and disability compensation.

Parkinson's disease is a degenerative brain disorder that leads to shaking, stiffness, and difficulty with walking, balance, and coordination. Symptoms are: tremor, or trembling in hands, arms, legs, jaw, and face; rigid or stiffness of the limbs and trunk; slowness of movement; and impaired balance and coordination.

VA Benefits for Parkinson's Disease

Veterans with Parkinson's disease who were exposed to herbicides during service may be eligible for disability compensation and health care. Veterans who served in Vietnam, the Korean demilitarized zone or another area where Agent Orange was sprayed may be eligible for a free Agent Orange registry health exam.

Surviving spouses, dependent children and dependent parents of veterans who were exposed to herbicides during military service and died as the result of Parkinson's disease may be eligible for survivors' benefits.

Current Research on Parkinson's Disease and Herbicides

The Health and Medicine Division (formally known as the Institute of Medicine) of the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded in its report 'Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 2008' { released July 24, 2009, that there is "suggestive but limited evidence that exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides used during the Vietnam War is associated with an increased chance of developing Parkinson's disease."

As a result, VA recognized Parkinson's disease as associated with exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service. VA's final regulation recognizing this association took effect on October 30, 2010.

VA ANNOUNCES PARTNERSHIP WITH HIRING OUR HEROES TO HELP BOOST MILITARY SPOUSE HIRING

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation's Hiring Our Heroes initiative recently joined efforts to lead and support military spouse employment at VA and throughout the federal government and reduce the high unemployment rate from military spouses. Effective July 29, this initiative is part of both Secretary Wilkie's stated priority of improving the customer and employee experience, as well as the Department of Defense (DOD) priority of retaining service members and supporting military families.

According to the VA, as one of only 10 federal agencies and the only VA entity that is a member of DOD's Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP), the Board of Veterans Appeals (Board) – with the support of the Veterans Experience Office (VEO) and Office of Human Resources and Administration (HR&A) – “will lead the effort focusing on the experience, skills and values that military spouses bring to their jobs such as resiliency, agility, global citizenship and unique understanding of the challenges of the veterans and their families.”

“This type of intergovernmental collaboration to promote the hiring and retention of military spouses, is important not only for current servicemen and women and their families but also for veterans and their families,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, “Military spouses bring a unique perspective to the federal workplace, and I am proud that VA is leading the charge in this area.”

The effort will encourage both the use of the military spouse hiring authority – as well as federal government participation in MSEP – and leverage best practices to improve the employee experience and achieve a successful, collective impact, for this population. As VA's representative, the Board's best practices will serve as an example for other government agencies who wish to hire, retain and promote military spouses.