



Olie L. Pope, Jr.
Veterans Service Officer
Travis County Veterans Services
100 N. Interregional, Ste. 2400,
Austin, TX 78767
P.O. Box 1748, Austin, TX 78701
512-854-9340 Fax 512-854-4453

Secondary Service Connection and Veterans Disability Benefits

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Most veterans know that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides disability benefits to vets who suffered an [injury or illness](#) directly connected to their service. However, these same veterans may not know that the VA also provides benefits for conditions caused or worsened by the initial service-connected disability. These are known as [secondary service-connected impairments](#).

Secondary service connection may be established for an illness or impairment which was caused or worsened by an existing service-connected disability. The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) says "A disability which is proximately due to, or the result of a service-connected disease or injury, shall be service connected, and shall be considered part of the original service-connected condition."

Although the VA promises such benefits to disabled veterans, actually receiving them may not be easy. Proving that your new condition was the result of your service-connected impairment or that your existing condition was made worse by your service-connected impairment may require extensive medical evidence and visits to doctors.

Examples of Secondary Service Connection

For example, if you injured your left knee in service, you may be entitled to service-connected benefits for the left knee. However, what if the injury to your left knee caused an alteration to your gait, forcing you to deal with the pain in your left knee by putting more weight on your right knee? If you later develop a problem in your right knee, you may be entitled to disability compensation for the right knee as secondary to the left knee.

Other examples of secondary service connected disabilities are the many conditions that result from diabetes, which the VA has presumed to be related to exposure to Agent Orange and other toxic substances. Veterans with a diabetes diagnosis due to chemical exposure may be eligible for secondary claims based on:

- [Peripheral artery disease](#)
- Ischemic heart disease
- Carotid artery disease
- Stroke
- Kidney disease
- Hypertension
- Diseases of the eye

Other examples of secondary service connection include:

- Back pain resulting from a hip condition;
- Medication for PTSD that causes erectile dysfunction;

- Tinnitus that accompanies service-connected hearing loss;
- [Depression](#) or other mental illness resulting from losses caused by service-connected injuries, such as traumatic brain injury, hearing loss and other life-changing injuries;
- Heart disease arising from service-connected hypertension;
- Heart disease resulting from certain service-connected amputations.

Things To Remember When Seeking Benefits for Secondary Service Connection

Some [claims for VA disability benefits](#) are relatively straightforward. Others, however, can be complex. There are some things to keep in mind when seeking VA disability benefits for a secondary service connection:

- Be sure you have good evidence that the new disability was the result of an accepted service-connected Disability;
- It is likely that you will need an expert medical opinion about the cause and effect relationship of your service-connected disability and your new condition;
- Your primary, or first, service-connected condition must be on record;
- It is important that your medical records show diagnosis and treatment of the secondary condition.

An advocate or claims agent knowledgeable about this type of [VA disability claim](#) can help you. Veterans should contact the DAV Chapter, Department, National Service Officers or the Travis County Veterans Service Office at 512-854-9340 to file a claim.