



Office of Disability and Medical Assessment (DMA)
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FACT SHEET

Acceptable Clinical Evidence (ACE) to Support the Compensation and Pension (C&P) Disability Examination Process

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this DMA Fact Sheet is to provide updated guidance on the use of the Acceptable Clinical Evidence (ACE) process for disability examination purposes.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) issued VHA Directive 1046, Disability Examinations, April 23, 2014, which defines VHA policy for administering the Disability Examination Program. By statute and VA regulation, a disability examination may be provided as necessary to adjudicate a claim for VA benefits pursuant to VA's duty to assist provisions. A request for a compensation and pension (C&P) disability examination may be sent to VHA by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to provide medical evidence necessary for VBA to render a decision concerning entitlement to VA benefits.

When appropriate, a method for responding to requests for C&P disability examinations is the Acceptable Clinical Evidence (ACE) process. The ACE process involves C&P clinicians completing Disability Benefit Questionnaires (DBQs) using the medical evidence currently in existence and a Veteran's claims file or medical records, supplemented by an interview with the Veteran if necessary, instead of requiring some Veterans to be examined in-person. The ACE process is only to be used when VBA has not specified that an in-person or telehealth examination be conducted, when a C&P clinician determines that sufficient medical evidence exists to complete the evaluation, and the addition of the embedded "ACE" statements is provided on eligible DBQs indicating the method used to obtain information for completion purposes.

This DMA Fact Sheet is intended to provide general information regarding the ACE process to disability examiners. This DMA Fact Sheet provides updated references, information, and terminology.

NOTE: The authority for the ACE process now stems from VHA Directive 1046, Disability Examinations, April 23, 2014

Guidance

1. When is the use of the ACE process appropriate and who makes the determination?

Unless VBA personnel have specifically required an in-person or telehealth examination be conducted, once VBA has requested an examination or opinion and provided all available medical information, including the electronic or paper claims file, VHA C&P clinical staff will triage the 2507 request to determine if the examination can be completed from the current medical records and claims file. When the existing medical evidence is found to be adequate and/or if supplemented by an interview with the Veteran as necessary, the request will be referred to a C&P disability clinician and the ACE process will be used to respond to the VBA request for the medical evaluation.

2. What records will the VHA C&P clinician use to complete the DBQ using the ACE process?

The clinician will review the existing records which should include the claims folder either in electronic or paper form, existing VHA and Department of Defense (DoD) treatment records, and information obtained through an interview with the Veteran, if additional information is required for DBQ completion.

3. How will use of the ACE process be documented?

The C&P clinician will document use of the ACE process on the DBQ. The C&P clinician will ensure the appropriate entries are made on the DBQ to report the use of the ACE process where specified (checkbox), and the source of the clinical evidence relied on to complete the DBQ. The clinician must identify the pertinent materials reviewed to complete the DBQ or render the opinion.

4. Does the ACE process change existing policy on C&P disability examinations?

Existing VHA policy provides guidance on the C&P disability examination process to obtain medical information to assist in the adjudication of claims. VHA clinicians will consult these references for additional guidance regarding the C&P disability examination process. The ACE process does not replace that guidance. The ACE process is a method for completing the DBQ.

For policies, procedures, and other information, guidance, and references for the C&P disability examination program, visit the DMA website: <http://vaww.demo.va.gov>.

5. Are there examples of the types of conditions for which the ACE process may be used?

Conditions which may be successfully addressed in an ACE review include **but are not limited to:**

- Prostate and other genitourinary conditions, which have already been previously assessed
- Some oncology cases, whether the cancer is active/remission, primary site identification, and/or if metastasized
- Ischemic Heart Disease, functional assessment may be done by Veteran interview
- Hearing loss and/or tinnitus can be assessed when there is a current (within past 6 months from the date of examination request) audiological testing of record, including speech recognition testing using the Maryland CNC word list
- Hypertension if the record contains blood pressure readings as specified
- Pulmonary conditions

6. Can the ACE process be used to provide medical opinions?

The ACE process may also be used to provide medical opinions. Opinions can be provided for:

- Providing a new opinion
- Clarifying a previous medical evaluation
- Clarifying a previous medical opinion
- For IDES clarifications or addendums where the Servicemember had a previous face-to-face SHA examination

7. Are there specific requirements when the VHA C&P disability evaluation clinician obtains additional information through Veteran interview?

Yes. If the ACE process involves obtaining information from a Veteran via interview, VHA Directive 1907.09 Identity Authentication for Health Care Services, June 6, 2019, must be followed. VHA Directive 1907.09 provides procedures VHA staff must follow to authenticate the identity of individuals requesting medical care, treatment, or services in person at Veterans Affairs health care facilities or through telephonic communications with VHA staff. These identification methods will ensure that the Veteran is the person being interviewed.

8. When can the ACE process not be used?

- The ACE process is not to be used when VBA has specified that an in-person or telehealth examination be conducted.

- The ACE process will not be used for disability examinations for mental health disorders. (Mental health examinations conducted using VVC are telehealth examinations not ACE reviews.)
- The ACE process will not be used to complete initial or residual traumatic brain injury disability benefits questionnaires (DBQ).
- The ACE process will not be used to complete the Separation Health Assessment (SHA) DBQ for Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) or Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) pre-discharge claims, except to resolve a request for clarification or addendums when the Servicemember had a previous face-to-face SHA DBQ. The conditions listed in the IDES or BDD exam request are otherwise eligible for the ACE process unless meeting one of the other general ACE exclusions listed.
- The ACE process will not be used when a general medical examination has been requested.

9. Can the ACE process be used for examination requests from VBA based on Board of Veteran’s Appeal remands?

The ACE process can be used for examination requests from VBA arising from remanded claims from the Board of Veterans’ Appeals (BVA), the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit unless the examination request indicated an in-person medical examination or a telehealth examination is required. If VBA specifically requests an in-person medical examination or a telehealth examination, the ACE process may not be used.

10. Can the ACE process be used if the VHA C&P clinician determines that the existing medical evidence is inadequate for evaluation purposes?

If the existing medical and other pertinent evidence is found to be inadequate or additional information is required, the Veteran will be scheduled for an in-person medical examination or a telehealth examination. The entire claims folder or VA electronic health record should be available in order to conduct an adequate evaluation using ACE.

11. Can telehealth technology be used as part of the ACE process?

Telehealth can be used as a means by which to conduct an interview with the Veteran as part of the ACE process.

12. How will the workload for the ACE process be documented?

Use current methodology to capture workload for the ACE process, including working with local resources such as the clinical applications coordinator (CAC) to establish an

“ACE clinic” in CPRS where ACE reports will be placed in order to be tracked. Other processes that allow the capture of data can also be considered.

For stop codes, ICD codes, and procedure codes for the ACE process, see the DMA Fact Sheet on Stop Codes, ICD-10CM, and CPT Codes for Disability Examination Encounters located on the DMA website: <http://vaww.demo.va.gov>, in the Policy and Procedures Resources tab, under the DMA Fact Sheets and FAQs link.

13. Definitions

Examination - An examination is a medical professional’s personal observation and evaluation of a claimant. It can be conducted in person or by means of telehealth.

Evaluation - An evaluation is an assessment of the medical evidence which may involve conducting an examination, providing an opinion, or both.

Opinion - An opinion refers to a medical professional’s statement of findings and views, which may be based on review of the claimant’s medical records or personal examination of the claimant, or both.

14. References

- VHA Directive 1907.09, Identity Authentication for Health Care Services, June 6, 2019
- VHA Directive 1046, Disability Examinations, December 6, 2018
- VHA Directive 1603, Certification of Clinicians Performing VA Disability Evaluations,
- DMA C&P Disability Examinations Procedure Guide

For additional information not covered in this Fact Sheet visit the DMA website at <http://vaww.demo.va.gov>, send an inquiry to the DMA Corporate Mailbox at CorporateMailbox.DMA@va.gov