

CLAIM DENIED: NEXT STEPS

How to read your decision letter, choose the right path forward, and build a stronger second attempt.

START WITH THE DENIAL LETTER, NOT YOUR GUT

A VA claim denial isn't the end of the road — it's usually the start of a more informed second attempt. Most veterans who eventually win their claim were denied at least once first. Before deciding what to do next, read your decision letter closely — specifically the **"Reasons for Decision"** section.

The denial almost always falls into one of these categories:

No current diagnosis — the medical evidence didn't confirm you have the condition

No in-service event — there's no record the condition started or was caused by your service

No medical nexus — a diagnosis and service exist, but nothing links the two

Not severe enough — the condition exists and is connected, but doesn't meet the rating criteria you're claiming

Your next move depends entirely on which of these applies. Filing the same type of evidence again without addressing the actual gap the VA identified is the single most common reason a second attempt fails too.

THE THREE PATHS FORWARD

Supplemental Claim

File this when you have **new and relevant evidence** you didn't submit before: a new medical opinion, additional service records, buddy statements, or updated treatment records. Usually the fastest, most direct path.

Higher-Level Review

File this when you believe the VA **misapplied the evidence already in your file** — no new evidence is submitted here. A more senior reviewer takes a fresh look at the same record.

Board Appeal

The longest path, but allows for a hearing, new evidence, and legal argument. Typically right for complex or long-contested claims, or after other paths still come back denied.

BUILDING A STRONGER SECOND ATTEMPT

Strong follow-up claims tend to include:

- A **new, specific medical opinion** that directly addresses the exact gap identified in the denial letter — not just a general diagnosis restatement
- **Buddy statements** from people who witnessed the in-service event or can speak to how the condition has affected you since
- **Updated treatment records** showing a consistent history, not a single visit
- A clear, written explanation connecting the dots between service, diagnosis, and current severity — don't assume the reviewer will connect them for you

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

- **Filing the same evidence again** without addressing the specific reason for denial
- **Missing the one-year window** to preserve your original effective date — file within one year of the decision to keep your original claim date for back-pay purposes
- **Choosing Higher-Level Review when you actually have new evidence** — new evidence isn't reviewable there; you'd need a Supplemental Claim instead
- **Giving up after one denial** — a large share of initially denied claims succeed on a Supplemental Claim or appeal once the actual gap is addressed

REMEMBER

A denial is common, not a dead end. The goal on your next attempt isn't to resubmit — it's to specifically close the gap the VA named in its decision letter.

READ YOUR DECISION LETTER

Fill this in with your actual decision letter in hand. Working through it on paper makes the next step clearer than reading the letter alone.

CONDITION(S) DENIED

EXACT "REASON FOR DECISION" WORDING (COPY IT DIRECTLY FROM THE LETTER)

Which gap does this match?

- ☐ No current diagnosis
- ☐ No in-service event on record
- ☐ No medical nexus connecting the two
- ☐ Not severe enough for the rating claimed

Which path am I taking?

- ☐ Supplemental Claim (I have new evidence)
- ☐ Higher-Level Review (evidence was misapplied)
- ☐ Board Appeal

EVIDENCE I STILL NEED TO GATHER

ONE-YEAR FILING DEADLINE (DATE)

READ THE FULL GUIDES ON THESE RELATED TOPICS

- veteran-roadmap.com/blog/how-to-read-your-va-decision-letter
- veteran-roadmap.com/blog/supplemental-claim-vs-higher-level-review
- veteran-roadmap.com/blog/how-to-write-a-strong-statement
- veteran-roadmap.com/blog/how-to-file-a-va-disability-claim

Educational information only. This guide is general information, not legal, medical, or financial advice, and The Veteran Roadmap is not affiliated with the Department of Veterans Affairs. For advice on your situation, talk with an accredited VSO, claims agent, or attorney. Official source: va.gov/decision-reviews. This guide is free to share — if it helped you, pass it along to another veteran.