



CAUSED, AGGRAVATED, OR CONNECTED BY AN INTERMEDIATE STEP?



Three theories. Three different medical explanations.

Choose the theory that fits the evidence. A strong opinion identifies the pathway, explains the mechanism, and addresses important competing causes in the veteran's record.

38 CFR 3.310(A)
CAUSED BY

PRIMARY CONDITION

↓

SECONDARY CONDITION BEGINS

Question: Did the service-connected disability or its treatment cause the secondary condition?

Develop: onset, mechanism, treatment effects, chronology, risk factors, and why the link applies here.

38 CFR 3.310(B)
AGGRAVATED BY

SECONDARY EXISTS

↓

PRIMARY INCREASES SEVERITY

Question: Did the service-connected disability cause an incremental increase in the secondary condition?

Develop: baseline when possible, current severity, worsening, timing, and the degree attributable to the primary.

MULTI-LINK THEORY
INTERMEDIATE STEP

PRIMARY CONDITION

↓

SUPPORTED STEP

↓

SECONDARY CONDITION

Question: Does a medically supported event or condition connect the primary to the secondary?

Develop: every link separately. A weak or missing middle link breaks the chain.

EVIDENCE DISCIPLINE

WHAT THE OPINION SHOULD EXPLAIN

- 1

CORRECT CONDITIONS AND DIRECTION
Name the established primary disability and the current secondary diagnosis. Do not rely on a relationship in the opposite direction.
- 2

MECHANISM AND CHRONOLOGY
Explain how the proposed pathway works medically and how the veteran's treatment and symptom timeline support it.
- 3

CAUSATION AND AGGRAVATION SEPARATELY
If both theories are raised, answer both. A negative causation opinion does not automatically answer aggravation.
- 4

COMPETING CAUSES AND LIMITATIONS
Address relevant risk factors and contrary evidence. Explain why the conclusion is still medically supportable.

BOARD PATTERNS ARE NOT A NEXUS. A graph connection or prior appeal can identify a theory to investigate. Competent evidence must still connect the conditions in the individual case.