



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

ACCEPTABLE CLINICAL EVIDENCE (ACE)

Providing DBQs And Opinions Using Existing Medical Evidence

VBA Compensation Service
Medical Disability Exam (MDE) Quality, 218A
January 2019



Learning Objectives

- Define ACE
- Understand the ACE process
- Know what evidence is required to use ACE
- Understand telephonic communication, identity verification, and when to terminate
- Know how to document the ACE process
- Discuss situations and conditions appropriate for the ACE process
- Understand who determines if an exam request can be completed by the ACE process
- Know when NOT to use the ACE process



What is ACE?

- The ACE process involves examiners considering the medical evidence currently in existence and a Veteran's claims file or medical records, supplemented by a telephone interview if necessary, to complete a DBQ in response to a C&P disability examination request instead of requiring Veterans to be examined.
- The ACE process **replaces an in-person examination** if the required conditions are met.
- Examiner must determine whether sufficient medical evidence exists to complete the examination DBQ prior to using the ACE process.
- Telehealth technology is NOT used as part of the ACE process.
No examination is conducted for ACE.



ACE Process

VBA personnel:

- Submits requests (2507) for disability evaluations including opinions
- Should identify all pertinent medical information (VHA, Department of Defense (DoD), and/or private records)
- All medical records to be reviewed are in VBMS

Vendor:

- Provide a one-time unique provider identification number on the examination notification letter. The vendor/provider will confirm the unique PIN with the Veteran prior to the telephone evaluation.
- Assigns the request to an Examiner



ACE Process continued

Examiner:

- Review the existing electronic claims folder in VBMS
- Determine if the necessary medical evidence is available in the claims folder. May supplement information by a telephone interview (not an exam), if necessary, with the Veteran or their care provider.
- If the necessary probative medical evidence is available, document the use of the ACE process on the DBQ, to include the source of the clinical evidence relied on to complete the DBQ or render the opinion.
- If an examiner receives an ACE request that lacks sufficient medical evidence, the examiner should notify the vendor that an exam is required.

ACE DBQs are assessed through VBA's quality review program



Evidence

- **Probative medical evidence includes:**
 - Veteran's electronic claims file (VBMS)
 - Telephone interview, if necessary
- Examiners will determine if the probative medical evidence is available or if additional information must be furnished through an examination.
- **An examiner using the ACE process:**
 - **Must explain the basis for the decision not to examine the Veteran, and**
 - **identify the specific materials reviewed to complete the DBQ.**



Telephonic Contact

If a telephone interview is required, the examiner will identify themselves to include providing their unique identification number referenced in Section 9.9 state the purpose of the call, and shall authenticate a Veteran's identity using the following questions:

1. Full legal name, including middle name;
2. Last four of the Veteran's social security number or claim number;
3. Birth Date, including year;
4. Branch of service and service dates; and
5. Home address.

It is acceptable if the Veteran does not remember their exact service dates but answers all the other questions correctly.



Telephonic Contact continued

- If a Veteran refuses to answer the questions, an ACE process cannot be completed and the Veteran will need to report for an in-person examination.
- The Veteran must possess mental capacity and adequate sensory abilities to participate in a telephone interview (as determined by the exclusionary factors listed below):
 1. Inability to effectively communicate due to:
 - Hearing impairment;
 - Language barrier;
 - Speech impediment; or
 - Memory deficit.
 2. Inability to effectively verbalize/express information.



Terminating a Telephonic Contact

The following factors apply during a telephone interview session and the Contractor/Examiner shall terminate the session:

- Veterans who show signs of cognitive disturbance and/or become uncomfortable with the telephone interview process;
- Veterans unwilling or unable to participate in a meaningful way.



How to document ACE on the DBQ:

ACE and Evidence Review

Indicate method used to obtain medical information to complete this document:

- Review of available records (without in-person or video telehealth examination) using the Acceptable Clinical Evidence (ACE) process because the existing medical evidence provided sufficient information on which to prepare the DBQ and such an examination will likely provide no additional relevant evidence.
- Review of available records in conjunction with a telephone interview with the Veteran (without in-person or telehealth examination) using the ACE process because the existing medical evidence supplemented with a telephone interview provided sufficient information on which to prepare the DBQ and such an examination would likely provide no additional relevant evidence.
- Examination via approved video telehealth
- In-person examination

Evidence Review

Evidence reviewed (check all that apply):

- Not requested No records were reviewed
- VA claims file (hard copy paper C-file)
- VA e-folder (VBMS or Virtual VA)
- CPRS
- Other (please identify other evidence reviewed):

DBQs completed using the ACE process will be called insufficient if ACE is not properly documented



Who determines ACE is appropriate?

The ACE process is only to be used when VBA has not specified in the exam request that an in-person examination be conducted **and** when the examiner/clinician determines that sufficient medical evidence exists to complete the evaluation.

- In lieu of scheduling an in-person examination, examiners have the option to complete a DBQ based on a review of existing paper and/or electronic medical evidence provided by VA and/or available in VBMS.
- They may also conduct a telephone interview with the claimant. This is known as Acceptable Clinical Evidence (ACE) examinations or the ACE process.

NOTE: The Veteran's proximity to the examination site and travel time requirements are of higher priority than reimbursement costs.



Examples of situations in which the ACE process might be appropriate include, *but are not limited to:*

- Existing medical evidence is adequate for the examiner to assess the level of impairment.
- A medical opinion is needed to determine whether a disability was incurred or aggravated in service.
- A medical opinion is needed to determine the relationship between a claimed disability and a service-connected disability.
- Assessing whether a disability incurred in or aggravated by military service caused or contributed to a Veteran's death.



Examples of conditions the ACE process may be used for include but are not limited to:

1. Prostate and other genitourinary conditions, which have already been assessed;
2. Some oncology cases, whether the cancer is active and/or primary site identification, if metastasized;
3. Ischemic Heart Disease, for which a functional assessment may be done by a telephone interview;
4. Tinnitus can sometimes be assessed in a telephone interview when a current audiometric examination suitable for VA benefits is of record;
5. Hypertension can be addressed by the ACE process if the record contains current blood pressure readings; and
6. Pulmonary conditions.



When NOT to use ACE

The ACE process is not available in the following categories of examinations:

1. Exams by vendor examiners when necessary electronic medical records are not available for review;
2. Exams required by BVA & CAVC remands;
3. General medical examination;
4. Female sexual arousal disorder (FSAD) exams;
5. Mental disorder examinations, including medical opinions for claimed conditions secondary to a service connected (SC) medical disorder. This specifically applies to physical secondary conditions related to SC mental disorders, such as bruxism;
6. Initial or residual traumatic brain injury (TBI) DBQs; and
7. When VBA specifically requests an in-person examination.



Summary

- In this lesson we have learned the ACE process, the use of telephonic interviews and other the evidence needed
- We discussed situations and conditions appropriate for the ACE process and those not appropriate for the ACE process.
- Understand who determines if an exam request can be completed by the ACE process
- We showed the necessary documentation and reminded you to ensure the DBQ is annotated as having been conducted through the ACE process.

Ultimately, The ACE process is to be used at the discretion of the examiner with the exceptions noted that are not ACE eligible.



Questions?



REFERENCES

Sources for the information presented here includes:

- Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Office of Disability and Medical Assessment ACE Training presentation dated October 26, 2018
- VHA Directive 2012-036, Identity Authentication for Health Care Services, December 28, 2012
- VHA Directive 2013-002, Documentation of Medical Evidence for Disability Evaluation Purposes, January 14, 2013
- VHA Directive 1046, COMPENSATION AND PENSION DISABILITY EXAMINATIONS, December 06, 2018
- VHA Directive 1603, Certification of Clinicians Performing VA Disability Evaluations, November 15, 2016
- VBA FL 12-22, Using Acceptable Clinical Evidence, October 3, 2012
- Contracts: 36C10X19D0010-12, 36C10X19D0007-9, 36C10X19D0004-6, and 36C10X19D0001-3