



## **Degenerative Arthritis of the Spine: VA Disability Rating Explained**

The VA rates degenerative arthritis of the spine under Diagnostic Code 5003, which falls under 38 CFR § 4.71a. The rating depends on the extent of limitation of motion, pain, and functional impact. Here's an overview of how the VA rates degenerative arthritis of the spine:

### **Diagnostic Code 5003: Degenerative Arthritis (Osteoarthritis)**

- **10%:** Assigned for each major joint or group of minor joints affected by limitation of motion, verified by objective findings such as swelling, muscle spasm, or evidence of painful motion.
- **20%:** Assigned if there is X-ray evidence of involvement of two or more major joints or two or more minor joint groups, with occasional incapacitating exacerbations.

Range of Motion Evaluation Degenerative arthritis of the spine is also evaluated based on the limitation of motion using the General Rating Formula for Diseases and Injuries of the Spine, which is more detailed for specific spinal conditions:

### **Cervical Spine (Neck) - Diagnostic Code 5242**

- **10%:** Forward flexion of the cervical spine greater than 30 degrees but not greater than 40 degrees; or, combined range of motion of the cervical spine greater than 170 degrees but not greater than 335 degrees; or, muscle spasm, guarding, or localized tenderness not resulting in abnormal gait or abnormal spinal contour.



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- **20%:** Forward flexion of the cervical spine greater than 15 degrees but not greater than 30 degrees; or, combined range of motion of the cervical spine not greater than 170 degrees; or, muscle spasm or guarding severe enough to result in an abnormal gait or abnormal spinal contour.
- **30%:** Forward flexion of the cervical spine 15 degrees or less; or, favorable ankylosis of the entire cervical spine.
- **40%:** Unfavorable ankylosis of the entire cervical spine.

### **Thoracolumbar Spine (Mid and Lower Back) - Diagnostic Code 5242**

- **10%:** Forward flexion of the thoracolumbar spine greater than 60 degrees but not greater than 85 degrees; or, combined range of motion of the thoracolumbar spine greater than 120 degrees but not greater than 235 degrees; or, muscle spasm, guarding, or localized tenderness not resulting in abnormal gait or abnormal spinal contour.
- **20%:** Forward flexion of the thoracolumbar spine greater than 30 degrees but not greater than 60 degrees; or, combined range of motion of the thoracolumbar spine not greater than 120 degrees; or, muscle spasm or guarding severe enough to result in an abnormal gait or abnormal spinal contour.
- **40%:** Forward flexion of the thoracolumbar spine 30 degrees or less; or, favorable ankylosis of the entire thoracolumbar spine.
- **50%:** Unfavorable ankylosis of the entire thoracolumbar spine.
- **100%:** Unfavorable ankylosis of the entire spine.



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### **Incapacitating Episodes (Intervertebral Disc Syndrome) - Diagnostic Code 5243**

If degenerative arthritis of the spine includes **intervertebral disc syndrome (IVDS)** and results in incapacitating episodes, it can be rated based on the frequency and duration of these episodes:

- **10%:** Incapacitating episodes having a total duration of at least one week but less than two weeks during the past 12 months.
- **20%:** Incapacitating episodes having a total duration of at least two weeks but less than four weeks during the past 12 months.
- **40%:** Incapacitating episodes having a total duration of at least four weeks but less than six weeks during the past 12 months.
- **60%:** Incapacitating episodes having a total duration of at least six weeks during the past 12 months.



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### **Additional Considerations**

- **Pain and Functional Loss:** The VA considers pain, weakness, excess fatigability, or incoordination during motion, especially during flare-ups or with repeated use over time.
- **Neurological Symptoms:** Any associated objective neurological abnormalities, such as radiculopathy, can be rated separately under the appropriate diagnostic code.
- **Combined Ratings:** If a veteran has multiple spinal conditions or conditions affecting different parts of the spine, the VA may assign separate ratings for each condition if they result in distinct functional impairments.

**Evidence Required To support a claim for degenerative arthritis of the spine, veterans need detailed medical documentation, which may include:**

- **Range of motion measurements.** - Imaging studies (e.g., X-rays, MRIs) that confirm the diagnosis.
- **Medical history and treatment records.** - Doctor's notes on pain, stability, functional limitations, and how the condition impacts daily activities and occupational functioning. Veterans seeking a higher rating for degenerative arthritis of the spine should ensure that their medical documentation comprehensively reflects the severity and functional impact of their condition.