



Lower Back/Neck: VA Disability Rating Explained

The VA rates lumbosacral (lower back) and cervical (neck) strains under the General Rating Formula for Diseases and Injuries of the Spine, using diagnostic codes 5237 (lumbosacral strain) and 5237 (cervical strain). The rating is based on the range of motion, the presence of muscle spasm, guarding, localized tenderness, and the impact on daily living and occupational functioning. Ratings range from 0% to 100%, depending on the severity of the condition.

Rating Criteria

10% Rating Symptoms: Forward flexion of the thoracolumbar spine greater than 60 degrees but not greater than 85 degrees, or forward flexion of the cervical spine greater than 30 degrees but not greater than 40 degrees.

- **Muscle Spasm/Guarding:** Muscle spasm, guarding, or localized tenderness not resulting in abnormal gait or abnormal spinal contour.
- **Combined Range of Motion:** Combined range of motion of the thoracolumbar spine greater than 120 degrees but not greater than 235 degrees, or combined range of motion of the cervical spine greater than 170 degrees but not greater than 335 degrees.



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20% Rating Symptoms: Forward flexion of the thoracolumbar spine greater than 30 degrees but not greater than 60 degrees, or forward flexion of the cervical spine greater than 15 degrees but not greater than 30 degrees.

- **Muscle Spasm/Guarding:** Muscle spasm or guarding severe enough to result in an abnormal gait or abnormal spinal contour such as scoliosis, reversed lordosis, or abnormal kyphosis.
- **Combined Range of Motion:** Combined range of motion of the thoracolumbar spine not greater than 120 degrees, or combined range of motion of the cervical spine not greater than 170 degrees.

30% Rating Symptoms: Forward flexion of the cervical spine 15 degrees or less.

- **Other Factors:** Favorable ankylosis of the entire cervical spine.

40% Rating Symptoms: Forward flexion of the thoracolumbar spine 30 degrees or less.

- **Other Factors:** Favorable ankylosis of the entire thoracolumbar spine.

50% Rating Symptoms: Unfavorable ankylosis of the entire thoracolumbar spine.

100% Rating Symptoms: Unfavorable ankylosis of the entire spine.



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Additional Considerations:

Intervertebral Disc Syndrome (IVDS): If the veteran's condition includes IVDS, it can be rated based on the number of incapacitating episodes over the past 12 months. Incapacitating episodes are defined as periods of acute symptoms requiring bed rest and treatment prescribed by a physician.

- 10%*: Incapacitating episodes totaling at least 1 week but less than 2 weeks per year.
- 20%: Incapacitating episodes totaling at least 2 weeks but less than 4 weeks per year.
- 40%: Incapacitating episodes totaling at least 4 weeks but less than 6 weeks per year.
- 60%: Incapacitating episodes totaling at least 6 weeks per year.

Neurological Symptoms: Separate ratings can be assigned for associated objective neurological abnormalities (e.g., radiculopathy affecting the extremities).



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Evidence Required To support a claim for lumbosacral or cervical strain, veterans need to provide:

- Detailed medical records documenting the range of motion and symptoms.
- Imaging studies (e.g., X-rays, MRIs) that support the diagnosis.
- Evidence of treatments, such as physical therapy or medications.
- Personal statements and, if applicable, statements from family members or coworkers describing the impact of the condition on daily life and functioning.

Factors Impacting Rating:

- **Pain and Functional Loss:** The VA considers pain, weakness, excess fatigability, or incoordination, particularly during flare-ups or with repeated use over time.
- **Occupational Impact:** How the condition affects the veteran's ability to work and perform daily activities. Veterans seeking a higher rating should ensure their medical documentation comprehensively reflects the severity and functional impact of their lumbosacral or cervical strain.