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Social Security Ruling (SSR) 96–4p. Titles II and XVI: Symptoms, Medically Determinable Physical and Mental Impairments, and Exertional and Nonexertional Limitations

AGENCY: Social Security Administration.

ACTION: Notice of Social Security Ruling.

SUMMARY: In accordance with 20 CFR 422.406(b)(1), the Commissioner of Social Security gives notice of Social Security Ruling 96–4p. This Ruling clarifies the Social Security Administration’s longstanding policy on the evaluation of symptoms in the adjudication of claims for disability benefits under Title II, Federal Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance Benefits, and Title XVI, Supplemental Security Income for the Aged, Blind, and Disabled, of the Social Security Act.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 2, 1996.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Joanne K. Castello, Division of Regulations and Rulings, Social Security Administration, 6401 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, MD 21235, (410) 965–1711.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Although we are not required to do so pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 552(a)(1) and (a)(2), we are publishing this Social Security Ruling in accordance with 20 CFR 422.406(b)(1).

Social Security Rulings make available to the public precedential decisions relating to the Federal old-age, survivors, disability, supplemental security income, and black lung benefits programs. Social Security Rulings may be based on case decisions made at all administrative levels of adjudication, Federal court decisions, Commissioner’s decisions, opinions of the Office of the General Counsel, and other policy interpretations of the law and regulations.

Although Social Security Rulings do not have the force and effect of the law or regulations, they are binding on all components of the Social Security Administration, in accordance with 20 CFR 422.406(b)(1), and are to be relied upon as precedents in adjudicating cases.

If this Social Security Ruling is later superseded, modified, or rescinded, we will publish a notice in the Federal Register to that effect.

(Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance, Programs 96.001 Social Security—Disability Insurance; 96.002 Social Security—Retirement Insurance; 96.004 Social Security—Survivors Insurance; 96.005 Special Benefits for Disabled Coal Miners; 96.006 Supplemental Security Income)

Dated: June 7, 1996.

Shirley S. Chater,
Commissioner of Social Security.

Policy Interpretation Ruling—Titles II and XVI: Symptoms, Medically Determinable Physical and Mental Impairments, and Exertional and Nonexertional Limitations

Purpose: The purpose of this Ruling is to clarify longstanding policy of the Social Security Administration on the evaluation of symptoms in the adjudication of claims for disability benefits under title II and title XVI of the Social Security Act (the Act). In particular, this Ruling emphasizes that:

1. A “symptom” is not a “medically determinable physical or mental impairment” and no symptom by itself can establish the existence of such an impairment.

2. In the absence of a showing that there is a “medically determinable physical or mental impairment,” an individual must be found not disabled at step 2 of the sequential evaluation process. No symptom or combination of symptoms can be the basis for a finding of disability, no matter how genuine the individual’s complaints may appear to be, unless there are medical signs and laboratory findings demonstrating the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment.

3. The terms “exertional” and “nonexertional” in the regulations describe types of functional limitations or restrictions resulting from a medically determinable physical or mental impairment; i.e., exertional limitations affect an individual’s ability to meet the strength demands of jobs, and nonexertional limitations or restrictions affect an individual’s ability to meet the nonstrength demands of jobs. Therefore, a symptom in itself is neither exertional nor nonexertional. Rather, it is the nature of the functional limitations or restrictions caused by an
impairment-related symptom that determines whether the impact of the symptom is exertional, nonexertional, or both.

4. The application of the medical-vocational rules in appendix 2 of subpart P of Regulations No. 4 depends on the nature of the limitations and restrictions imposed by an individual's medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s), and any related symptoms.

Citations (Authority): Sections 216(i), 223(d) and 1614(a)(3) of the Social Security Act, as amended; Regulations No. 4, sections 404.1505, 404.1508, 404.1520, 404.1528(a), 404.1529, 404.1569a and subpart P, appendix 2; and Regulations No. 16, sections 416.905, 416.908, 416.920, 416.924, 416.928(a), 416.929 and 416.969a.

Policy Interpretation

Need To Establish the Existence of a Medically Determinable Physical or Mental Impairment

The Act defines disability as the inability to do any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment that can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than 12 months. An "impairment" must result from anatomical, physiological, or psychological abnormalities that can be shown by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques. Although the regulations provide that the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment must be established by medical evidence consisting of signs, symptoms, and laboratory findings, the regulations further provide that under no circumstances may the existence of an impairment be established on the basis of symptoms alone. Thus, regardless of how many symptoms an individual alleges, or how genuine the individual's complaints may appear to be, the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment cannot be established in the absence of objective medical abnormalities; i.e., medical signs and laboratory findings.

No symptom or combination of symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, shortness of breath, weakness, or nervousness, will not be found to affect the individual's ability to do basic work activities (or, for an individual under age 18 claiming disability benefits under title XVI, to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner) unless medical signs and laboratory findings show that there is a medically determinable physical or mental impairment. In claims in which there are no medical signs or laboratory findings to substantiate the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment, the individual must be found not disabled at step 2 of the sequential evaluation process set out in 20 CFR 404.1520 and 416.920 (or, for an individual under age 18 claiming disability benefits under title XVI, 20 CFR 416.924).

In addition, 20 CFR 404.1529 and 416.929 provide that an individual's symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, shortness of breath, weakness, or nervousness, will not be found to affect the individual's ability to do basic work activities (or, for an individual under age 18 claiming disability benefits under title XVI, to function independently, appropriately, and effectively in an age-appropriate manner) unless medical signs and laboratory findings show that there is a medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce the symptom(s) alleged. Exertional and Nonexertional Limitations

Once the existence of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) that could reasonably be expected to produce the pain or other symptoms alleged has been established on the basis of medical signs and laboratory findings, allegations about the intensity and persistence of the symptoms must be considered with the objective medical abnormalities, and all other evidence in the case record, in evaluating the functionally limiting effects of the impairment(s). In addition, for determinations or decisions at step 5 of the sequential evaluation process for individuals claiming disability benefits under title II and individuals age 18 or older claiming disability benefits under title XVI, 20 CFR 404.1569a and 416.969a explain that an individual's impairment(s) and related symptoms, such as pain, may cause limitations of function or restrictions that limit an individual's ability to meet certain demands of jobs. These sections divide limitations or restrictions into three classifications: Exertional, nonexertional, and combined exertional and nonexertional. Exertional limitations or restrictions affect an individual's ability to meet the seven strength demands of jobs (sitting, standing, walking, lifting, carrying, pushing, and pulling), while nonexertional limitations or restrictions affect an individual's ability to meet the nonstrength demands of jobs (all physical limitations and restrictions that are not reflected in the seven strength demands, and mental limitations and restrictions). The nature of the limitations or restrictions affects whether the rules in appendix 2 to subpart P of Regulations No. 4 may be used to direct a decision or must be used as a framework for decisionmaking.

Likewise, under the regulations, symptoms in themselves are neither exertional nor nonexertional. An individual's symptoms, however, can cause limitations or restrictions that are classified as exertional, nonexertional, or a combination of both. For example, pain can result in an exertional limitation if it limits the ability to perform one of the strength activities (e.g., lifting), or a nonexertional limitation if it limits the ability to perform a nonstrength activity (e.g., fingering or concentrating). It is the nature of the limitations or restrictions resulting from the symptom (i.e., exertional, nonexertional, or both) that will determine whether the medical-vocational rules in appendix 2 may be used to direct a decision or must be used as a framework for decisionmaking. For additional discussion of this longstanding policy, see SSR 96-8p, "Titles II and XVI: Assessing Residual Functional Capacity in Initial Claims."

Effective Date: This Ruling is effective on July 2, 1996.