

Five things you need to know about optimizing Social Security



Most people plan to rely on Social Security for retirement income. And the statistics bear that out. Social Security benefits represent 30% of income needs for retirees.¹ Those preparing to retire may not understand the different ways to claim Social Security and, depending on their individual financial situations, the strategies to consider for optimizing their benefit amount.

A guaranteed source of income may mitigate risks

Planning for income in retirement involves many variables and risks at the individual level, such as longevity and income, as well as macroeconomic factors, such as inflation, fluctuating markets and taxes. While Social Security is not the single solution for all of these issues, it may mitigate these risks by guaranteeing a stream of income that is not tied to market performance.

In the past few decades, Americans have seen a dramatic difference in the retirement experience. Today, people are living longer and workers need to plan for 25 to 30 years in retirement, a much longer time horizon than for past generations.

At the same time, the retirement investment landscape has changed. Pension plans, once a source of retirement income for many workers, are now offered by far fewer employers. The defined contribution, or 401(k) plan, has become the most common offering in the workplace. Consequently, plan participants have taken on more responsibility for managing their retirement savings and planning for income in retirement.

Guaranteed income, like Social Security, can act as a stabilizing factor in market downturns. While variable retirement savings vehicles can lose money in a market decline, a guaranteed source of income can offer consistency and may help clients avoid liquidating other investments to meet expenses.

Social Security also carries tax advantages that other forms of retirement savings, like Individual Retirement Accounts, do not offer. Some retirees will receive benefits free of taxes.

The bottom line is that Social Security can be an important part of a retirement income plan because it provides a lifetime stream of guaranteed income that is not dependent on markets and also adjusts periodically to keep pace with inflation.

Fundamentals of Social Security

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|---------------------------------|--|
| Eligibility | At least 40 quarters of work |
| Individual contributions | Social Security payroll tax of 6.2% on first \$176,100 of earnings |
| Benefits | Calculated based on average monthly earnings indexed for inflation |
| Retirement age | Reduction in benefits before full retirement age (age 67 if born in 1960 or later), increase in benefits if delay (up to age 70) |
| Early retirement | Available at age 62 with 30% decrease in benefits |
| Spousal benefits | Spousal benefit (50% of covered spouse's benefit) and survivor benefit (100% of covered spouse's benefit) |

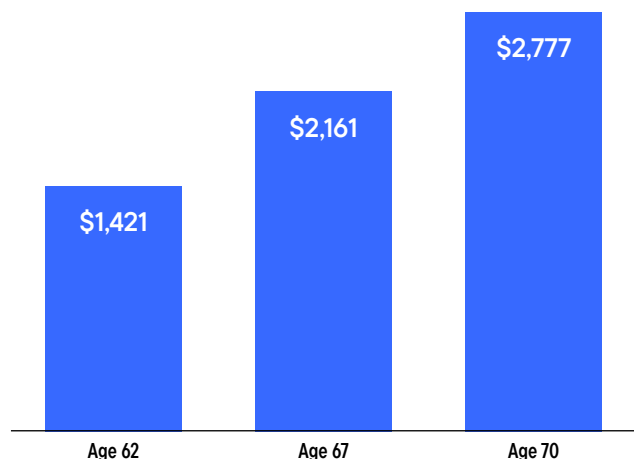
Timing makes a big difference

While available to millions of workers, it is not a one-size-fits-all plan because many variables influence Social Security benefits. It is important to make the right decisions in order to mitigate the risks of longevity and inflation. Understanding how Social Security benefits are calculated is important, and identifying the opportune time to file a claim can have a major impact on financial success in retirement. The following are five essential things to know about determining a strategy for Social Security benefits.

1. Social Security Administration, 2023.

1 | Claiming benefits too early can cause problems

One of the greatest challenges for savers is estimating their longevity. Some savers are likely to outlive their retirement nest egg.



Source: Social Security Quick Calculator benefit estimate based on an individual age 62 with \$75,000 in current earnings. Does not include increases in benefit levels due to regular cost-of-living adjustments.

However, the more common problem is not living beyond life expectancy, but claiming benefits too early. This reduces the income potential of full benefits. About 60% of workers sign up for Social Security before reaching full retirement age. At this point, the benefit is significantly lower and may be more likely to be subject to taxation for those still working.

Waiting can help. By delaying the start of Social Security benefits, retirees will receive more money. In essence, they receive an 8% “raise” for every year they delay taking benefits.

If you are still working, the timing of your claim can have an impact on the amount of Social Security benefits you receive. For 2025, your Social Security benefits are reduced by \$1 for each \$2 in earnings above \$23,400.

If you claim benefits at full retirement age or older, there is no limit on the amount you can earn by working in retirement.²

2 | Plan for your surviving spouse

It is important for couples to consider longevity when planning for the surviving spouse. Historically, many higher-earning spouses have taken Social Security early, without maximizing the benefit potential. This strategy exposes the surviving spouse to longevity risk of receiving a lower benefit if the higher-earning spouse dies first. When making the decision to claim Social Security, think about joint life expectancy. If possible, maximize the highest-earner’s benefit to provide a higher lifetime benefit for the surviving spouse.

Determining the best time to apply for Social Security benefits also depends on a couple’s financial and tax situation, age difference and life expectancy. It can be an important discussion for clients to have with an advisor so that they understand that claiming benefits early can affect not only the monthly benefit amount, but also the benefits received by the spouse and, ultimately, the survivor benefits.

Because of the availability of Social Security spousal benefits, married couples have more choices of how they claim Social Security in retirement. Spouses can claim benefits at different times, which may enable them to take advantage of higher benefits if claims are delayed, resulting in an increase in lifetime and survivor benefits as well.

3 | Special rules for divorced and widowed individuals

Divorced individuals may receive benefits based on the ex-spouse’s earnings record. There are certain conditions that must be met:

- The marriage lasted 10 years or more
- The ex-spouse is eligible for Social Security benefits (even if they have not filed for benefits yet)
- The spouse making claim on the ex-spouse’s record is unmarried and age 62 or older

Unlike spouses or ex-spouses, widows may receive benefits as early as age 60. However, the benefit amount for beginning benefits that early would be 71.5% of the full amount and is based on the deceased spouse’s earnings. The longer benefits are delayed, the greater the amount. However, unlike retirement benefits, survivor (and spousal) benefits do not increase if claimed after full retirement age.

Lastly, survivor benefits are lost if you remarry prior to age 60, unless that marriage ends in divorce or death.

2. This earnings test applies in years before attaining full retirement age. A higher earnings amount (\$62,160 for 2025) applies during the year of attaining full retirement age. If retirement benefits are withheld because of earnings, benefits will be increased starting at full retirement age to take into account the benefits that were withheld.

4 | Social Security is likely to be taxed

For retirees with moderate or higher incomes, it is likely that some portion of benefits will be taxed. Depending on the income level, up to 85% of benefits may have to be reported as taxable income.

| Income level ³ | Taxation |
|---|--|
| Between \$25,000 and \$34,000 (\$32,000 and \$44,000 for couples) | Up to 50% of benefits reported as taxable income |
| Over \$34,000 (\$44,000 for couples) | Up to 85% of benefits reported as taxable income |

Before suspending benefits there are some key considerations:

- Do you have enough income from other sources to meet current expenses?
- Are other family members, such as a spouse, receiving benefits based on your work record? If so, those benefits will be suspended as well (except for divorced spouse benefits which continue).
- If premiums for Medicare Part B are being taken out your Social Security check you will be billed directly once benefits are suspended.

Retirees should seek to maximize their benefits

Social Security is a critical component of an effective retirement income plan. Many investors—across all income levels—will include Social Security as a source of retirement income.

Understanding and making the right decisions around claiming Social Security can be a big driver of success in retirement and can translate into thousands of dollars of benefits over time. Seeking professional advice can be a vital aspect in the planning process, and a financial advisor can help individuals and couples understand the different ways to claim Social Security and try to maximize benefits.

5 | There may be opportunities to change your mind

When to begin taking Social Security is one of most important financial decisions individuals will make, so careful consideration to avoid making a mistake is critical. However, there may be options to make changes after Social Security benefits have started.

Withdraw your claim within 12 months

Once you claim your benefit, you are generally locked into that benefit amount, unless you change your mind within 12 months of starting benefits and withdraw your request to begin. If this request is approved, you must repay all the benefits you and your family have received based on your retirement application. The Social Security Administration essentially treats this as if you never claimed benefits in the first place. You can only withdraw benefits once.

Suspend your benefit at full retirement age (FRA)

If you have reached your full retirement age but have not reached age 70 yet, you can voluntarily suspend your benefits. Once suspended, you will accrue delayed retirement credits which can increase your monthly benefit in the future when they resume. For each year suspended there is an 8% increase in benefits.

This strategy may make sense if you claimed Social Security early, but are now concerned that you will live longer and receive a reduced benefit for the rest of your life. Suspending benefits is a way to increase your Social Security income in the future. The suspension ends the month after you request to resume benefits or the month before you turn age 70, whichever is earlier.

3. IRS Notice 703. Income calculation for taxation of Social Security benefits equals your adjusted gross income (AGI), one half of Social Security benefits, and tax-exempt municipal bond interest. Income from Roth accounts does not negatively impact taxation of Social Security benefits.

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