

Social Security: 6 Critical Facts Retirees Must Know



Social Security provides an important source of guaranteed income for most Americans. Choosing the right claiming strategy is even more important under new Social Security regulations via the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015.

WHAT IS SOCIAL SECURITY?

Social Security is a federal government-sponsored retirement benefit designed to replace some of your income in retirement. If you or your spouse have worked for at least 40 quarters and paid taxes on your income, you may be eligible to collect benefits in retirement.

According to the Social Security Administration, Social Security benefits account for about 34% of retirement income for the average American¹. One of the biggest mistakes today's retirees can make is to underestimate the importance of Social Security when mapping out their retirement strategies. In a time of vanishing pensions and volatile markets, Social Security offers government-guaranteed income that isn't vulnerable to market risk, can't be outlived and can provide for your loved ones after your death.

In late 2015, the Social Security program changed significantly when Congress removed several advanced claiming strategies that helped retirees increase their lifetime income. The new rules make it more important than ever to make informed and educated decisions when including Social Security in your overall financial planning for retirement.

HERE ARE SIX IMPORTANT SOCIAL SECURITY FACTS YOU SHOULD BE AWARE OF:

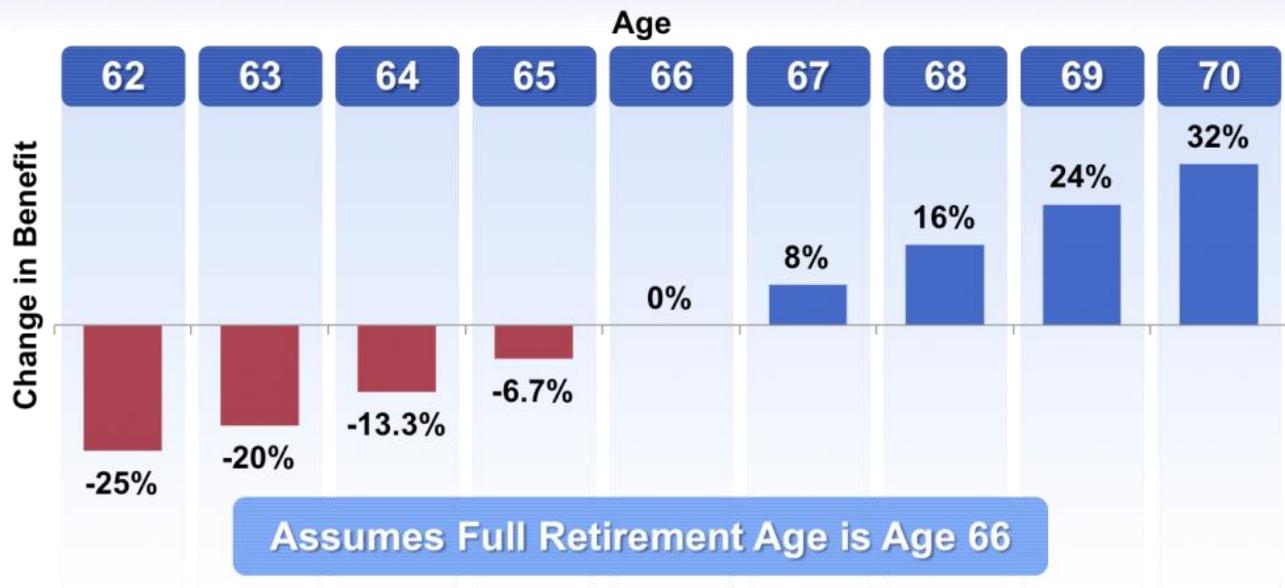
YOUR AGE AFFECTS THE BENEFIT YOU WILL RECEIVE

The earliest age that you can file for Social Security is 62 (unless you qualify for a disability), but even at this age you will not be able to collect your full benefit. The Social Security Administration reduces those benefits by either 25% if your full retirement age (FRA) is 66 or 30% if it's 67. For example, if your full monthly benefit at age 66 were \$1000, you would only receive \$750 monthly if you start collecting at age 62. The reduction in benefits will be permanent.

You will be eligible to collect 100% of your benefit at FRA, which is age 66 for anyone born between 1943 and 1954, age 66 plus a two-month delay per birth year for those born between 1955 and 1960, and age 67 for anyone born after 1960. So if you were born in 1951, your FRA is 66. If you were born in 1956, your FRA would be 66 years and four months².

A good number of Americans are forced to file for Social Security benefits early for a variety of financial reasons. This can cost them valuable lost income. If you can afford to wait until your FRA, you'll be eligible for 100% of your benefits. If you can afford to wait even longer, your benefit will permanently increase by up to 8% every year until age 70. As an example, if your basic benefit were \$1000 at your FRA of age 66, it would increase to \$1320 per month (or 132% of your benefit) by waiting until age 70 to take it. If you were born after 1942, you'll qualify for the 8% credit each year³.

Collecting Social Security Before and After Full Retirement Age



Source: SSA.gov. Does not include cost-of-living increases.

EVEN UNDER THE NEW SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM, IT MAY MAKE FINANCIAL SENSE FOR AT LEAST ONE MEMBER OF A COUPLE TO DELAY CLAIMING BENEFITS UNTIL AGE 70

Many retirees wrestle with the question of when is the right time to file for benefits. While there is no perfect time to file for benefits, choosing the right claiming strategy can significantly affect how much you can collect over your lifetime. Many Americans are forced to claim early benefits for financial reasons, but if you are able to delay taking Social Security, it could mean collecting significantly more over the course of your life.

If either you or your spouse expect to live past the age of 80, you're generally better off waiting to claim as long as possible to receive a larger benefit.

However, if your health is not good or you need the income, you may want to consider claiming Social Security benefits early.

Ultimately, your personal Social Security strategy will depend upon many personal factors such as taxes, marital status, age, health and other sources of income. It's always a good idea to discuss your situation with a financial professional who can analyze your situation and offer personalized advice.

YOU CAN WORK AND COLLECT SOCIAL SECURITY, BUT BE AWARE THAT IT MAY AFFECT YOUR MONTHLY BENEFIT

Many Americans are continuing to work well into their retirement years. While the government allows you to work and collect Social Security benefits, they may be reduced if you are below your FRA.

LIFE EXPECTANCIES

- A man reaching age 65 in 2015 can expect to live, on average, until 84.3 years of age
- A woman turning age 65 in 2015 can expect to live, on average, until 86.6 years of age
- About one out of four 65-year olds today will live past age 90, and one out of ten will live past age 95

In both 2015 and 2016, if you are over age 62 but younger than your FRA, you will lose \$1 of your benefit for every \$2 you earn over \$15,720⁴. Starting with the month you reach FRA, you will start receiving benefits with no reduction even if you keep working. Once you reach your FRA, Social Security will recalculate your benefit and give you credit for any benefits that were withheld while you were working. Keep in mind that you must pay Social Security and Medicare taxes as long as you are earning income⁵.

SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS ARE TAXABLE

Unfortunately, retiring from your job does not mean you get to retire paying taxes. If you collect substantial income from sources like wages, investment income, rental income or any source that you report on your tax return, you will very likely owe taxes on your Social Security benefits. The tax rate you'll pay depends entirely on your overall income bracket since Social Security gets treated like ordinary income.

How Social Security Benefits Are Taxed

	No Taxes on SS Benefits	Up to 50% of SS Benefits are Taxed	Up to 85% of SS Benefits are Taxed
Single	Income <\$25,000	\$25,000-\$34,000	Income >\$34,000
Married, Filing Jointly	Income <\$32,000	\$32,000-\$44,000	Income >\$44,000

However, there are strategies that may help you maximize your income while reducing taxes. For example, one method is to take as much income as possible from sources that are excluded from the “provisional income” that the SSA uses to calculate the taxation of your Social Security⁶. According to IRA rules, income from the following sources may potentially be excluded from provisional income calculations⁷:

- Roth IRA distributions
- Nontaxable pensions and annuities
- Inheritances and gifts

Please keep in mind that taxes are just once piece of an overall financial picture and it’s important to not let them overshadow other critical factors. If you are concerned about the effect of taxes on your retirement income, we recommend that you speak with a qualified financial professional.

MARRIED? DON’T FORGET ABOUT SPOUSAL AND SURVIVOR BENEFITS

Married couples need to think about how their Social Security claiming strategies will affect their spouse’s benefits and income in retirement. This issue is especially important when one spouse is significantly older than the other or earned more during a career. If your spouse isn’t eligible for a personal benefit, his or her benefits are based on your personal benefit, which means that the age at which you file for benefits will have a major impact on what he or she is eligible to collect.

For many couples, maximizing a survivor benefit for a younger spouse is a major consideration. Since a survivor who has reached FRA will be eligible for 100% of the primary worker’s benefit, he or she will be able to take advantage of any delayed retirement credits and cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) that the primary earner accumulates. Bottom line: the longer you wait to collect Social Security, the more your spouse will be able to claim as a widow or widower. Surviving spouses can usually choose between collecting a personal benefit or a survivor benefit, depending on which one is higher⁸.

PAYING ATTENTION TO SOCIAL SECURITY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER UNDER NEW RULES

On November 2, 2015, President Obama signed into law a bipartisan budget deal that affected two strategies that helped retirees increase their lifetime benefits by claiming income now and claiming more income later: **file-and-suspend** and **restricted applications for benefits**.

The regulations kick in on May 1, 2016, and will mean that many retirees will lose access to these advanced strategies after that deadline. **Based on our current understanding of the new regulations⁹:**

- Retirees who are not at least 62 by January 1, 2016, will no longer be able to choose between receiving a spousal benefit or receiving their own benefit. They will be “deemed” as filing for both and receive the larger of the two benefits without accumulating additional credits.
- After May 1, retirees will not be able to file and then suspend their own benefit while triggering benefits for a spouse or child. Instead, they will have to receive their own benefit to allow a family member to collect on the primary record. They can still suspend a benefit to accrue credits, but a spouse cannot receive a benefit while it is suspended.
- Retirees who suspend their benefit will no longer be able to receive their suspended benefits in a lump sum before age 70.
- Retirees who have already taken advantage of the old rules (or do so before the deadline) will be grandfathered in and not affected.

Social Security is a foundational element of a retirement income strategy, and the new rules may affect your financial picture. If you had planned to use of these Social Security benefit strategies to increase your income in retirement, then you will need to revisit your income assumptions to ensure that you have enough to live comfortably. **However, there are still ways to increase the amount of Social Security benefits you can claim.**

ARE YOU MAKING THESE CRITICAL SOCIAL SECURITY MISTAKES?

- Ignoring spousal and survivor benefits
- Claiming too early
- Claiming too late
- Forgetting about earnings limits
- Ignoring the impact of taxes
- Not getting professional advice

Married couples will still be able to take advantage of other advanced claiming strategies such as delaying one spouse’s benefit to accrue extra credits while the other claims a personal benefit. You can potentially improve your retirement income picture by:

- Claiming benefits late to earn additional retirement credits
- Minimizing taxes paid on your Social Security benefits
- Maximizing survivor benefits for yourself and your spouse

No strategy can be right for everyone, and it’s important to consider your entire financial picture when making decisions about Social Security. As with many financial strategies, details matter and things like age differences between you and your spouse, taxes and life expectancy can all affect your overall outcome.

Under the new Social Security rules, making informed decisions about when to file is critical to making the most of your benefits.

CONCLUSIONS

We hope that you've found this special report educational and informative and that you have come away with some ideas for how to optimize your Social Security benefits. For many retirees, Social Security benefits are the cornerstone of their income strategies and account for a significant percentage of their income. It's absolutely critical to plan ahead now so that you can make the most of this invaluable resource. Every strategy will not work for every retiree, which is why it's so important to take the time to analyze your needs and test possible scenarios.

The new regulatory environment means that it's more important than ever to understand your Social Security options. The moral of the tale is this: **you cannot depend on a single financial or retirement strategy to build a comfortable retirement.** One of the benefits of working with a financial professional is that we keep track of changing retirement issues. We can help you analyze your financial situation and develop personalized recommendations designed to help you best leverage Social Security in light of your own financial goals.

If you or anyone close to you would like to discuss how to maximize your Social Security benefits with a professional advisor, please give our office a call at (703) 669-3660 to schedule a review or complimentary consultation.

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¹ "Fast Facts & Figures about Social Security, 2015" SSA. https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/chartbooks/fast_facts/2015/fast_facts15.pdf

² "Full Retirement Age" SSA. <https://www.ssa.gov/planners/retire/retirechart.html> "Delayed Retirement: If You Were Born between 1943 and 1954" SSA. <http://www.ssa.gov/retire2/1943.htm>

³ "Retirement Planner: Delayed Retirement Credits." SSA. <http://ssa.gov/retire2/delayret.htm>

⁴ "Earnings/Self-Employment and Monthly Limits in 2015" SSA. <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/hlp/isba/10/hlp-isba061-aet4.htm>

⁵ "Retirement Planner: Getting Benefits While Working" SSA. <http://ssa.gov/retire2/whileworking.htm>

⁶ "Benefits Planner: Income Taxes and Your Social Security Benefits" SSA. <http://ssa.gov/planners/taxes.htm>

"Do You Have to Pay Taxes on Social Security Benefits?" Kiplinger. <http://kiplinger.com/article/taxes/T051-C000-S001-are-your-social-security-benefits-taxable.html>

⁷ "Publication 525 (2013), Taxable and Nontaxable Income" IRS. <http://irs.gov/publications/p525>

⁸ "Survivors Planner: How Much Would Your Benefit Be?" SSA. <http://ssa.gov/survivorplan/Ifyou5.htm>

⁹ "Social Security Claiming Strategy Triage" Investment News. <http://investmentnews.com/article/20151102/BLOG05/151109994/social-security-claiming-strategy-triage>