ULLOA FINANCIAL

-Elevate your legacy-

SOCIAL SECURITY DECISION GUIDE

A practical framework for evaluating when and how Social Security may fit within your retirement income plan.

How to use this guide

Use this guide to organize your Social Security information, compare claiming choices, and identify questions that require additional analysis. Social Security decisions should be evaluated together with retirement income, taxes, employment, healthcare, longevity, and household needs. This guide does not calculate or recommend a specific claiming age.

YOUR DECISION SNAPSHOT

Information	Your Notes
Name(s):	
Date completed:	
Year of birth:	
Full retirement age:	
Current planned claiming age:	
Next review date:	

THE BEST CLAIMING DECISION DEPENDS ON MORE THAN ONE NUMBER.

1. START WITH YOUR PERSONAL RECORD

Your benefit estimate depends on your earnings history and the age when you begin benefits.

- ☐ Create or sign in to your personal my Social Security account at SSA.gov.
- ☐ Review your earnings record and report errors as soon as possible.
- ☐ Record your estimated monthly benefit at age 62, full retirement age, and age 70.
- ☐ Confirm whether you have at least 40 credits, generally equal to about 10 years of covered work.
- ☐ Consider whether future work could replace a lower earning year in the 35-year benefit calculation.
- ☐ Save or print your latest Social Security Statement for planning records.

Why the earnings record matters

Social Security generally calculates retirement benefits using your highest 35 years of indexed earnings. Fewer than 35 years of earnings can introduce zero years into the calculation, while additional higher-earning years may improve the benefit estimate.

RECORD YOUR ESTIMATES

Claiming Point	Estimated Monthly Benefit	Annual Amount
Age 62	$	$
Full retirement age	$	$
Age 70	$	$
Other age: ______	$	$

FULL RETIREMENT AGE REFERENCE

Year of Birth	Full Retirement Age
1943-1954	66
1955	66 and 2 months
1956	66 and 4 months
1957	66 and 6 months
1958	66 and 8 months
1959	66 and 10 months
1960 or later	67

Important distinction

Your full retirement age is not necessarily the age you stop working. It is the age at which you may receive your unreduced retirement benefit based on your earnings record.

2. UNDERSTAND THE CLAIMING TRADE-OFF

You may generally claim retirement benefits from age 62 through age 70.

- Claiming before full retirement age permanently reduces the monthly benefit compared with the full retirement age amount.
- Delaying after full retirement age increases the monthly benefit through delayed retirement credits, up to age 70.
- There is no additional increase for waiting beyond age 70.
- Starting earlier may provide payments over more years, while delaying may provide a larger monthly amount later.

For people born in 1960 or later

Full retirement age is 67. A person who begins at age 62 may receive about 70% of the full retirement age benefit. Waiting until age 70 may produce about 124% of the full retirement age benefit. Your personalized estimate from SSA should be used for actual planning.

FACTORS THAT MAY SUPPORT CLAIMING EARLIER

- ☐ Current income is insufficient to meet essential expenses.
- ☐ Health or longevity concerns suggest a shorter planning horizon.
- ☐ Employment has ended unexpectedly and other resources are limited.
- ☐ A family member may become eligible for certain family benefits once the worker files.
- ☐ Using Social Security earlier could avoid an unsuitable level of withdrawals from other assets.

FACTORS THAT MAY SUPPORT DELAYING

- ☐ Other reliable income can cover spending needs during the delay period.
- ☐ Long life expectancy increases the value of a larger lifetime monthly benefit.
- ☐ The higher earner wants to strengthen the potential survivor benefit for a spouse.
- ☐ Continued work may improve the earnings record and reduce the need for withdrawals.
- ☐ A larger inflation-adjusted income base would improve later-life cash flow.

Do not rely only on a break-even age

A break-even calculation can be useful, but it does not capture survivor protection, taxes, investment risk, healthcare costs, or the value of reliable income later in life.

3. COORDINATE BENEFITS AS A HOUSEHOLD

Married, divorced, and widowed individuals may have additional benefit considerations.

SPOUSAL BENEFITS

- A spouse may qualify for a benefit based on the worker's record, subject to eligibility rules.
- A spousal benefit is generally highest at the spouse's full retirement age and does not earn delayed retirement credits after that age.
- For most people who are eligible for both retirement and spousal benefits, filing is treated as filing for both, and SSA pays the higher combined amount allowed under its rules.

DIVORCED-SPOUSE BENEFITS

- A divorced spouse may qualify based on a former spouse's record when marriage-duration, age, marital-status, and other requirements are met.
- A claim on an eligible former spouse's record does not generally reduce the former spouse's benefit or the benefit of a current spouse.

SURVIVOR BENEFITS

- A surviving spouse may be eligible as early as age 60, or earlier in certain disability or caregiving situations.
- Survivor benefits may range from a reduced amount to as much as 100% of the deceased worker's benefit, depending on claiming age and eligibility.
- Survivor benefits follow different filing rules from retirement and spousal benefits. It may be possible to claim one benefit first and switch later.

Household planning principle

For couples, the decision is not simply when each person should claim. It is also how the two choices affect total household income while both spouses are living and the income available to the survivor.

HOUSEHOLD QUESTIONS

- ☐ Which spouse has the higher benefit based on their own record?
- ☐ How would household income change after the first death?
- ☐ Would delaying the higher earner's benefit improve survivor protection?
- ☐ Are either spouse or former spouse eligible for family, divorced-spouse, or survivor benefits?
- ☐ Have both spouses reviewed their personal SSA estimates?

4. WORKING WHILE RECEIVING BENEFITS

Employment can affect benefits before full retirement age and may also improve your earnings record.

2026 retirement earnings test

If you are under full retirement age for all of 2026, SSA generally withholds $1 in benefits for every $2 of earnings above $24,480. In the year you reach full retirement age, SSA generally withholds $1 for every $3 earned above $65,160, counting only earnings before the month you reach full retirement age. Beginning with the month you reach full retirement age, the earnings test no longer applies.

- ☐ Estimate wages and net self-employment income for the year you plan to claim.
- ☐ Determine whether the special first-year monthly rule may apply if you retire mid-year.
- ☐ Report changes in expected earnings to SSA to reduce the chance of an overpayment.
- ☐ Remember that withheld benefits are not necessarily lost permanently. SSA recalculates the benefit at full retirement age to account for months benefits were withheld.
- ☐ Consider whether continued higher earnings may replace a lower year in the 35-year calculation.

EMPLOYMENT WORKSHEET

Item	Estimate or Notes
Expected annual wages	$
Expected net self-employment income	$
Expected retirement date	
Expected claiming date	
Full retirement age month and year	
Potential earnings test concern	Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure ☐

What counts for the earnings test

The retirement earnings test generally focuses on wages and net earnings from self-employment. Pension income, investment income, interest, annuities, and capital gains generally do not count as earnings for this test, although they may affect taxes or other planning decisions.

5. CONSIDER TAXES, MEDICARE, AND OTHER INCOME

The amount deposited into your bank account may differ from the gross benefit shown on your SSA estimate.

INCOME TAXES

- ☐ Estimate whether combined income may cause part of Social Security benefits to be taxable.
- ☐ Include wages, pensions, retirement account withdrawals, interest, dividends, and other taxable income in the analysis.
- ☐ Consider whether the claiming date affects Roth conversions, capital gains, or required minimum distributions.
- ☐ Review state tax treatment, which varies by state.
- ☐ Determine whether federal withholding or estimated tax payments may be appropriate.

MEDICARE

- ☐ Do not assume delaying Social Security means Medicare should also be delayed.
- ☐ Review Medicare enrollment timing near age 65, especially if you are not receiving Social Security automatically.
- ☐ Confirm whether active employer coverage permits delayed Part B enrollment without penalty.
- ☐ Consider how income-related Medicare premium adjustments may affect retirement cash flow.
- ☐ Account for premiums deducted from Social Security payments.

Medicare reminder

SSA advises people who delay retirement benefits to review Medicare enrollment at age 65. Missing an enrollment window can result in coverage gaps or late-enrollment penalties unless an exception applies.

INCOME COORDINATION QUESTIONS

- ☐ Which accounts will fund spending before Social Security begins?
- ☐ Will delaying Social Security require larger portfolio withdrawals?
- ☐ Could a different withdrawal sequence improve tax flexibility?
- ☐ How will pension elections and annuity income interact with Social Security?
- ☐ Is there enough liquidity for emergencies during a delay period?

6. COMPARE YOUR CLAIMING SCENARIOS

Use personalized SSA estimates and reasonable planning assumptions.

Planning Factor	Earlier Claim	Full Retirement Age	Delayed Claim
Claiming age			
Estimated monthly benefit	$	$	$
Estimated annual benefit	$	$	$
Expected employment income	$	$	$
Estimated portfolio withdrawals	$	$	$
Estimated taxes	$	$	$
Estimated Medicare premiums	$	$	$
Survivor benefit consideration			
Primary advantage			
Primary trade-off			

QUESTIONS BEFORE DECIDING

- ☐ What essential expenses must Social Security help cover?
- ☐ How long might retirement reasonably last for you and your spouse?
- ☐ What happens if investment returns are poor early in retirement?
- ☐ What happens if one spouse lives much longer than expected?
- ☐ Would claiming earlier or later reduce flexibility elsewhere in the plan?
- ☐ Has the decision been stress-tested for inflation, healthcare costs, and an early death?
- ☐ Are you using current personalized estimates rather than general examples?

A sound decision is coordinated

Social Security should be evaluated as part of a retirement income plan that also considers pensions, investments, cash reserves, taxes, insurance, housing, healthcare, and legacy goals.

YOUR DECISION PREPARATION CHECKLIST

- ☐ My earnings record has been reviewed for accuracy.
- ☐ I have current benefit estimates for multiple claiming ages.
- ☐ I know my full retirement age.
- ☐ I understand the permanent effect of claiming before full retirement age.
- ☐ I understand delayed retirement credits stop at age 70.
- ☐ I have reviewed work and earnings-test rules if I may claim before full retirement age.
- ☐ I have considered spousal, divorced-spouse, family, or survivor benefits when applicable.
- ☐ I have reviewed Medicare enrollment timing separately from Social Security claiming.
- ☐ I have estimated taxes and net cash flow, not only the gross benefit.
- ☐ I have considered longevity and the financial needs of a surviving spouse.
- ☐ I have compared how different claiming dates affect portfolio withdrawals.
- ☐ I have identified the questions that require professional or SSA guidance.

YOUR NEXT STEPS

Priority Action	Who Will Help	Target Date
1.		
2.		
3.		

NOTES

Knowledge is the first step. A plan is the next.

Social Security rules and annual limits can change. Review your decision when your employment, health, marital status, retirement date, income needs, or applicable law changes. Confirm eligibility and benefit amounts directly with the Social Security Administration before filing.

OFFICIAL SOURCES AND EFFECTIVE DATE

Prepared using Social Security Administration information available in July 2026, including SSA guidance on retirement claiming ages, full retirement age, delayed retirement credits, working while receiving benefits, family and survivor benefits, Medicare enrollment, and 2026 annual earnings limits. Visit SSA.gov or contact the Social Security Administration for current, personalized information.

EDUCATIONAL DISCLOSURE

This material is for educational purposes only and is not individualized financial, investment, insurance, tax, legal, Medicare, or Social Security advice. Eligibility and benefit amounts are determined by the Social Security Administration. Rules may change and may apply differently based on personal circumstances. Confirm information with SSA and consult the appropriate professional before making a claiming decision.