



WISER *Fact Sheet*

Women's Institute for a Secure Retirement

Social Security: What Every Woman Needs to Know

How do I become eligible for benefits?

- **As a worker:** You must work and pay Social Security taxes for at least 10 years (40 quarters), and be at least 62 years old.
- **As a spouse or divorced spouse:** You must be at least 62 years old. If you are a divorced spouse, you must have been married to your ex-husband for at least 10 years and be unmarried.
- **As a widow or divorced widow:** You must be at least 60 years old and not remarried.

If I qualify for more than one benefit, can I receive both?

No. You will always receive the benefit that provides you with the higher monthly amount. You don't receive both benefits added together.

When can I receive Social Security retirement benefits?

You may receive full benefits at "full retirement age." Full retirement age is increasing gradually until it reaches age 67 for those who were born in 1960 or later. For your full retirement age, see the chart below.

Year of Birth	Full Retirement Age
1937-1939	65
1938	65 and 2 months
1939	65 and 4 months

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1940	65 and 6 months
1941	65 and 8 months
1942	65 and 10 months
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

What happens to my benefit if I retire early?

You may receive reduced benefits at:

- age 50 if you are a disabled widow;
- age 60 if you are a widow or divorced widow;
- age 62 if you want to retire early.

If you start taking your benefits early, your monthly payments will be reduced permanently. Your benefit is reduced about one-half of 1% for each month you start your Social Security before your full retirement age. For example, if your full retirement age is 65 and 10 months and you sign up for Social Security when you are 62, you would only get 75.8% of your full benefit.

What happens to my benefit if I delay retirement?

You may increase the amount you receive if you delay taking benefits beyond your full retirement age. The increase applies from full retirement age to age 70 (see chart below).

Increase for Delayed Retirement

Year of Birth	Yearly Rate of Increase	Monthly Rate of Increase
1933-34	5.5%	11/24 of 1%
1935-36	6.0%	1/2 of 1%
1937-38	6.5%	13/24 of 1%
1939-40	7.0%	7/12 of 1%
1941-42	7.5%	5/8 of 1%
1943 or later	8.0%	2/3 of 1%

*If you were born on January 1st, you should refer to the rate increase for the previous year.

For example, Jane was born in 1936, making her eligible for full Social Security retirement benefits at age 65. However, she doesn't plan on retiring until age 68. Her annual percentage increase in benefits will be 6%. Because she is delaying her retirement for three years, her Social Security checks will be 18% higher (3 years x 6% per year). If Jane's monthly benefit would have been \$1,000 had she retired at age 65, the monthly benefit she will begin receiving at age 68 will be \$1,180.¹

What kind of Social Security benefit can I receive if I am a widow?

You may be eligible for survivor's benefit if your spouse (or former spouse) passes away and he is eligible for Social Security benefits. To collect his full Social Security benefit, you must have reached your full retirement age (although you can get reduced benefits starting at age 60, age 50 if you are disabled) and be unmarried. If you are raising the child(ren) of your deceased spouse under the age of 16, you may collect survivor's benefits regardless of your age or marital status. These children receive benefits in their own names from ages 16-19 if they are unmarried and still in high school.

What kind of Social Security benefit can I receive if I am divorced?

If your ex-husband is eligible for Social Security benefits, you can receive spousal benefits on his work record, even if he has remarried and his current wife is collecting benefits on his record. However, you

¹ ElderLawNet, Inc. (2008). *Social Security*. Retrieved July 2011 from Elder Law Answers: http://www.elderlawanswers.com/Elder_Info/Elder_Article.asp?id=700

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must have been married to him for at least ten years and be currently unmarried. If eligible, you can collect a benefit up to 50% of your ex-husband's Social Security benefit. However, if your ex-husband is deceased and you are unmarried, you can collect survivor's benefits, which would be 100% of your ex-husband's Social Security benefit.

How much will my benefit be?

You can calculate your Social Security benefit by using the Social Security Administration's Retirement Planner on their website: <http://www.ssa.gov/planners/benefitcalculators.htm>.

Can I still receive mailed paper statements?

The Social Security Administration used to mail annual paper statements to everyone age 25 and older listing their lifelong earnings record and estimating their expected retirement benefit. However, the paper statements are no longer being mailed out (although the government will resume mailing annual statements to workers age 60 and older who are not yet receiving benefits in October 2011). The Social Security Administration is working on making these statements available online by 2012.

How do I start my Social Security benefits?

Because Social Security benefits are not automatic, you have to apply for them. It is easy to apply online by going to www.SSA.gov. You can also apply over the telephone by calling 1-800-772-1213, or apply in person by visiting your local Social Security office.

How long can I collect Social Security benefits?

These benefits will continue for as long as you live and are adjusted every year for inflation.

Will I have to pay taxes on my Social Security benefits?

You may have to pay federal income taxes on your Social Security benefits if you have other substantial income (such as wages, self-employment, interest, dividends, etc.) in addition to your benefits.

- If you file a joint federal tax return with your spouse and you have a combined income that is between \$32,000 and \$44,000, you may have to pay income taxes on half of your Social Security benefits.
- If your combined income is more than \$44,000, up to 85% of your benefits may be taxable.
- If you file a federal tax return as an individual and your total income is between \$25,000 and \$34,000, you may have to pay income taxes on half of your Social Security benefits.
- If your total income as an individual is more than \$44,000, you may have to pay taxes on up to 85% of your benefits.

Do I get benefits if I have left the paid workforce to care for my family?

Social Security benefits are based on 35 years of an individual's earnings, but a person who works for at least ten years will generally qualify for some benefits. Currently, Social Security does not give credits toward your work record for time spent out of the workforce caring for children or other dependents; only paid working years are credited.

When can I receive Medicare benefits?

Medicare is the federal health insurance program for people age 65 and older. You may start to receive Medicare benefits at age 65.

How do I do to start my Medicare benefits?

Like Social Security, you must apply for Medicare benefits. You can be penalized for signing up late so you should apply several months before you turn 65, even if you are not ready to retire. You can apply online at <http://www.ssa.gov/medicareonly/> or call 1-800-772-1213.