

Ten Common Social Security Questions

Q: When should I start collecting Social Security?

A: If you are healthy and can afford it, you should consider waiting until you qualify for full retirement age, which is 66; or even wait until you are 70. If you claim Social Security benefits before reaching full retirement age, they will be reduced.

For example, if you claim benefits at age 62, you may get \$1,000 per month. If you wait until age 66, you will get at least 33% more, or \$1,333. If you wait until you're 70, you will get at least 75% more, or \$1,750.

Q: I am about to turn 62 and plan to file for Social Security benefits. How do I apply?

A: You should apply three months before you want to start collecting your benefits. Sign up online at <https://secure.ssa.gov/apps6z/iClaim/rib> or call 1-800-772-1213. Some documents you may have to produce are:

- Your Social Security card or a record of the number;
- Your birth certificate;
- Proof of U.S. citizenship or lawful alien status;
- Military discharge papers if you served before 1968;
- and last year's W-2 tax form or tax return if you are self-employed.

Q: How are Social Security benefits calculated?

A: Benefits are based on the amount of money you made during your lifetime; primarily by averaging the earnings from your 35 highest income-generating years. In 2010, the average monthly benefit for retirees was \$1,172. You may calculate what your monthly payments will be on the government's Social Security website: <http://www.ssa.gov/planners/>.

Q: Can I Receive Social Security if I am still working?

A: If you work and are full retirement age or older, you may keep all of your benefits, no matter how much you earn. If you are younger than full retirement age, there is a limit to how much you can earn and still receive full Social Security benefits. If you are younger than full retirement age during all of 2010, \$1 will be deducted from your benefits for each \$2 you earned above \$14,160.

Q: My husband and I are getting a divorce. He wants the settlement agreement to say that I cannot get his Social Security benefits. Can he do that?

No, your ex-spouse has no control over your future benefits. You may be eligible for a divorced spouse's benefits if:

- You were married at least 10 years
- are now unmarried,
- are 62 or older,
- and if any benefit from your own work record would be less than the divorced spouse's benefit.

Q: I do not qualify for Social Security benefits. My husband gets them, but I am worried he may not live much longer. Will I be able to collect benefits?

Yes. However, your benefits will depend on your age and situation: If you are at full retirement age or older, you will get 100 percent of your deceased husband's benefit. A widow between 60 and full retirement age receives a reduced benefit.

Even if you were receiving Social Security benefits and your deceased spouse's benefits were greater, you can receive the higher benefit amount.

Q: I filed for bankruptcy after I was laid off. Do Social Security benefits count as income for bankruptcy purposes, or are they protected?

Your benefits are protected. Social Security is excluded from the calculation of disposable income when setting up a debtor repayment plan.

Q: Can I collect Social Security and unemployment at the same time?

Yes. Unemployment benefits are not considered wages under Social Security's annual earnings test, so you may still receive your benefit. However, the amount of your unemployment benefit could be decreased if you receive a pension or other retirement income, including Social Security and railroad retirement benefits. Contact your state unemployment office for more information.

Q: I receive Social Security disability benefits. When will I switch to regular Social Security and will the monthly amount change?

When you reach full retirement age, your disability benefits automatically convert to retirement benefits. The amount should remain the same.

Q: Will my retirement pension reduce my amount Social Security benefits?

A. If your pension is from a job where you also paid Social Security taxes, it will not affect your Social Security benefits. However, pensions based on work that is not covered by Social Security (for example, federal civil service and government jobs) may reduce the amount of your Social Security.