SOCIAL SECURITY QUICK FACTS & RETIREMENT STRATEGIES

Important Notice: This document provides general information based on current laws for the **2026 calendar year**. It does not constitute formal tax, legal, or financial advice. Because individual circumstances vary, always consult with your financial professional and the Social Security Administration (SSA) before filing for benefits.

📲 SECTION 1: ESTABLISHING YOUR BASELINE

1. How do I determine what my estimated Social Security income benefits will be at retirement?

You should create an online account via the official SSA portal at **www.ssa.gov/myaccount/** to download your personalized Social Security Statement (p. 1). Your statement provides:

- **Benefit Estimates:** Projected monthly payouts for retirement and disability (p. 1).
- **Family Protection:** Estimated survivor benefits for your family (p. 1).
- **Earnings History:** A complete record of your lifetime certified earnings (p. 1).
- **Tax Contributions:** Total Social Security and Medicare taxes paid to date (p. 1).

Note: The SSA only mails paper statements to workers age 60 and older who do not receive benefits and have not created an online account (p. 1).

2. How does life expectancy factor into my filing strategy?

Your health and family medical history directly impact your total lifetime cumulative benefit:

- **Statistical Averages:** According to the SSA, a man reaching age 65 today lives to an average of **age 84**, while a woman lives to an average of **age 87** (p. 1).
- **Early Filing (Age 62):** May be appropriate if you are in poor health or face a shorter-than-average life expectancy, even though your monthly check is permanently reduced (p. 1).
- **Delayed Filing (Age 67–70):** Maximizes lifetime payouts if you are in good health and have other assets to draw from during early retirement (p. 1).
- **Spousal Consideration:** If you are the higher wage earner, your filing age sets the baseline for your spouse's potential survivor benefits later on (p. 2).

3. Will my retirement benefits be adjusted for annual inflation?

Yes (p. 2). Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLAs) protect your purchasing power from being eroded by inflation (p. 2). The calculation is based on the third-quarter percentage changes in the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) (p. 2).

- **2026 COLA: 2.8%** (p. 2)
- **2025 COLA: 2.5%** (p. 2)

⏳ SECTION 2: TIMING & WORKING IN RETIREMENT

4. What is my Full Retirement Age (FRA)?

Your Full Retirement Age (FRA) is the age at which you are eligible to receive 100% of your unreduced primary insurance amount (p. 2).

- For everyone born in **1960 or later**, your FRA is exactly **67 years old** (p. 2).

5. When can I legally start receiving my retirement benefits?

- **Early Baseline:** You can file as early as **age 62**, but your monthly benefit is permanently reduced by a fraction of a percent for each month prior to your FRA (p. 2).
- **Delayed Baseline:** For every year you delay filing past your FRA up until **age 70**, you earn Delayed Retirement Credits (p. 2). This increases your monthly check by **8% annually** (p. 2). Credits stop accruing at age 70 (p. 2).

6. Can I work and collect Social Security retirement benefits at the same time?

Yes, but if you file *before* reaching your FRA, your benefits are subject to the annual Earnings Test limits (p. 2):

- **Under FRA for the Entire Year:** If your earned income exceeds **$24,480**, the SSA withholds $1 for every $2 over the limit (p. 2).
- **The Year You Reach FRA:** Up until the exact month you turn 67, the income limit is **$65,160** (p. 2). The SSA withholds $1 for every $3 over the limit (p. 2).
- **Reaching FRA and Beyond:** The earnings test disappears. You can earn unlimited income without any benefit reduction (p. 3).

Note: Withheld earnings are not lost. The SSA recalculates and permanently increases your monthly benefit once you hit FRA to account for those withheld months (p. 3).

🏦 SECTION 3: TAXATION & SPECIAL PROVISIONS

7. Are my Social Security benefits subject to federal income tax?

Your benefits are taxed if your "Combined Income" (Adjusted Gross Income + Nontaxable Interest + 50% of your Social Security Benefit) exceeds statutory limits (p. 3):

- **Individual Filers:** Combined income between **$25,000 and $34,000** may require taxes on up to 50% of benefits (p. 3). Above **$34,000**, up to **85%** of benefits are taxable (p. 3).
- **Joint Filers:** Combined income between **$32,000 and $44,000** may require taxes on up to 50% of benefits (p. 3). Above **$44,000**, up to **85%** of benefits are taxable (p. 3).

8. How does a public or government pension affect my Social Security benefits?

It no longer reduces your benefits. Under the historic passage of the **Social Security Fairness Act**, the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) and the Government Pension Offset (GPO) have been completely **repealed**.

- **The Impact:** If you are a teacher, firefighter, police officer, or civil servant earning a non-covered government pension, you now receive **100% of your unreduced Social Security benefits**, alongside your full spousal or survivor benefits.

👥 SECTION 4: SPOUSAL, DIVORCE, & FAMILY BENEFITS

9. What benefits are available to my spouse under my work record?

Your spouse can receive a spousal benefit even if they have a limited or non-existent work history (p. 3).

- **Requirements:** Your spouse must be at least **62 years old**, and you must already be actively collecting your own retirement benefits (p. 3).
- **Payout Cap:** The maximum spousal benefit is **50% of your FRA benefit** (p. 3). This maximum is reduced if your spouse chooses to file before their own FRA (p. 3).
- **Deemed Filing:** Your spouse cannot "cherry-pick" benefits. Filing for a spousal benefit automatically triggers an application for their own retirement benefit, and the SSA pays the higher of the two amounts (p. 3).

10. Can I claim benefits based on a former spouse’s earnings record?

Yes, provided you meet all of the following federal requirements (p. 4):

- Your marriage lasted for **10 consecutive years** or longer (p. 4).
- You are currently **unmarried** (p. 4).
- You are at least **62 years old** (p. 4).
- Your ex-spouse is eligible for benefits (if they haven't filed yet, you must be divorced for at least 2 consecutive years) (p. 4).
- Your own worker benefit is lower than the amount you would receive under their record (p. 4).

Note: Claiming benefits on an ex-spouse has zero impact on their monthly check or their current spouse's benefits (p. 5).

11. What happens to my benefits if my spouse passes away?

As a widow or widower, you are protected by survivor benefits (p. 5):

- **Full Survivor Benefits:** You can claim **100% of your deceased spouse's monthly benefit** if you wait until your own survivor FRA to file (p. 5).
- **Early Reduced Benefits:** You can file for reduced survivor benefits as early as **age 60** (or **age 50** if you have a certified disability that began within 7 years of your spouse's death) (p. 5).
- **Public Pension Holders:** Thanks to the elimination of the GPO penalty, your survivor benefits are no longer slashed by your government pension.

12. Are my children eligible for dependent benefits under my retirement record?

When you qualify for Social Security retirement benefits, your dependent children may also receive monthly checks (p. 5). Eligible children must be (p. 5):

- Unmarried, AND (p. 5)
- Under **age 18**, OR (p. 5)
- **Age 19** if they are still full-time high school students (grade 12 or below), OR (p. 5)
- **Age 18 or older** if they were severely disabled before reaching age 22 (p. 5).

Note: Total family allocations are subject to a strict statutory Family Maximum limit (p. 5).

🔄 SECTION 5: FLEXIBILITY & CHANGING YOUR MIND

13. Once I begin receiving monthly benefits, can I change my mind later?

Yes, you have two primary options if you regret filing early:

- **The 12-Month Withdrawal (Reset Button):** Within the first **12 months** of starting benefits, you can file Form SSA-521 to withdraw your application (p. 4). You must repay every dollar you, your spouse, or your children received (p. 4). This stops your benefits and allows them to grow at 8% a year until you reapply later (p. 4). You can only do this **once in your lifetime** (p. 4).
- **Voluntary Suspension (Age 67–70):** If you are past your FRA but under age 70 and cannot afford to repay past benefits, you can voluntarily suspend your monthly checks (p. 4). This allows your benefit to start earning the 8% annual delayed retirement credits until you reactivate it or turn 70 (pp. 2, 4).

🤝 Schedule Your Professional Review

Do not file blindly. Bring this completed checklist to a strategic review session so we can map these variables directly into your comprehensive retirement income plan.

Contact Us Today:

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Disclaimer: This checklist is for educational purposes only. Financial professionals can provide general strategic positioning but do not provide formal tax, legal, or definitive Social Security Administration filing execution. Please cross-reference all personal benefit timelines directly with a local SSA representative or ssa.gov.
