



# What married couples should know before claiming their Social Security benefits



Make Your Plan  
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## Key Insights

- Marriage can significantly affect Social Security benefits, potentially leading to far larger combined lifetime benefits for couples than they would receive as single individuals.
- Understanding the various benefit types available to each partner and strategizing accordingly is essential for maximizing joint lifetime benefits.
- Each partner's life expectancy is a key consideration—but it is not as straightforward for couples as for single people.

**B**eing married can help you garner thousands of dollars of additional cumulative lifetime benefits as a couple, compared with the total benefits if you were both single.

Each partner of a married couple may be eligible for multiple types of Social Security benefits: their own retirement benefits, spousal benefits, and survivor benefits. An optimal claiming strategy for a married couple considers all of these types of benefits and uses the rules of Social Security to maximize expected joint lifetime benefits.

## Important considerations if you are married

Social Security benefits for married couples are dependent on so much more than just how many years you worked and what you earned. In addition, your full retirement age (FRA) for retirement benefits, which is between 66 and two months and 67 for most people making these decisions today, can have a big effect on the math for couples.

There are several considerations to help determine which claiming strategy best suits your household situation.

### Consideration #1:

*How do your retirement benefits compare with your spouse's?*

If you are a dual-earning couple, you have flexibility to coordinate when each of you begins your retirement benefits, so you can maximize your joint expected lifetime benefits.

If one spouse has a primary insurance amount (PIA)—the retirement benefits level if claimed at FRA—that is more than twice as much as the other spouse's PIA, then the lower earner may qualify for spousal benefits. Those benefits can be as much as half of the higher-earner's PIA. However, the lower earner would not be eligible for spousal benefits until the higher earner files for his or her retirement benefits.

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## Consideration #2:

*How long do you think each of you will live?*

It's important that you and your spouse make a reasonable estimate of life expectancy for each of you. What is your current health status? How long did your parents live? How healthy is your lifestyle now?

These factors—and more—contribute to life expectancies. And each of your life expectancies is critical in determining how and when each of you should file for benefits.

While each of you may be eligible to collect benefits while both partners are still living, when one of you passes away, only the survivor will collect benefits—and this benefit level will usually be the retirement benefits of the higher earner. These benefits are guaranteed for life and automatically increase with cost-of-living adjustments annually.

In general, benefits based on the higher-earner's record will last until the second spouse dies, while benefits based on the lower-earner's record will cease at the death of the first spouse. Thus, usually, the main factor for the higher earner's claiming decision is when the second spouse is expected to die.

For example, suppose Carla, the higher earner, is 63, while her spouse, Louis, is two years younger at 61. Carla has health issues and, therefore, she has a life expectancy of 76 years, whereas Louis expects to live to age 90. Because of Louis's long expected life span, Carla, as the higher earner, would ideally wait until age 70 to claim

her benefits. The key is that benefits based on her earnings record are expected to last until she would have been 92, if still alive.

The claiming decision for a lower-earning spouse like Louis may be trickier. It may make sense for him to claim as soon as possible, at age 62, because of Carla's short life expectancy. Then, if Louis's PIA is less than half of Carla's PIA, he would qualify for the higher spousal benefits, but only if she has filed for her retirement benefits.

However, there are situations where a lower earner should still wait until FRA or another age because of how spousal benefits are calculated. Especially if spousal benefits are a possibility, it makes sense to consult with a financial professional about claiming strategies.

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## Consideration #3:

*Do either of you plan to continue working?*

If you are planning to start benefits before reaching your FRA, any earnings you have may temporarily reduce your benefits—even to zero. These benefits are not lost forever; your monthly benefits are adjusted at your FRA, but it will still take many years to gain back what was withheld. It may make sense, then, to wait until after you reach your FRA to begin benefits, since the earnings test no longer applies once you reach your FRA.

Social Security claiming strategies can be complex, with lots of variables and options to think about. Consider working with a professional to evaluate your strategies and have confidence in your decision.

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