

Social Security Spousal Benefits FAQ



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Deciding when to claim Social Security benefits may be one of the most important decisions you make as you plan for retirement. If you are married, the decision becomes more complicated, as you need to coordinate with your spouse in order to maximize your benefits. As you read this piece, discuss the various options with your spouse and talk with your financial advisor or investment professional about the role of Social Security in your retirement income plans.

Overview

What are the requirements to receive a spousal benefit?

- You are eligible for a spousal benefit even if you never worked.
- You must be age 62 or older and have been married to your current spouse for at least one year.
- Your spouse must be receiving their retirement or disability benefit.
- If you worked, your spousal benefit at Full Retirement Age (FRA)¹ must be greater than your retirement benefit at FRA.

SPOUSAL BENEFITS	
Minimum benefit	32.5%–35% at age 62
Maximum benefit	50% of your spouse’s retirement benefit at his or her Full Retirement Age (FRA) ¹
Your spouse claims their retirement benefit before Full Retirement Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does not reduce spousal benefit
Your spouse claims their retirement benefit after Full Retirement Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does not increase spousal benefit
You claim your retirement benefit before Full Retirement Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reduces spousal benefit
Option to start with spousal and switch	The option to start with the spousal benefit and switch to your retirement benefit was only available to people born on or before 1/1/1954.

¹ Full Retirement Age (FRA) is age 66 for anyone born between 1943 and 1954. It increases by two months for every year from 1955 to 1959. FRA is age 67 for anyone born 1960+.



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Calculating spousal benefits

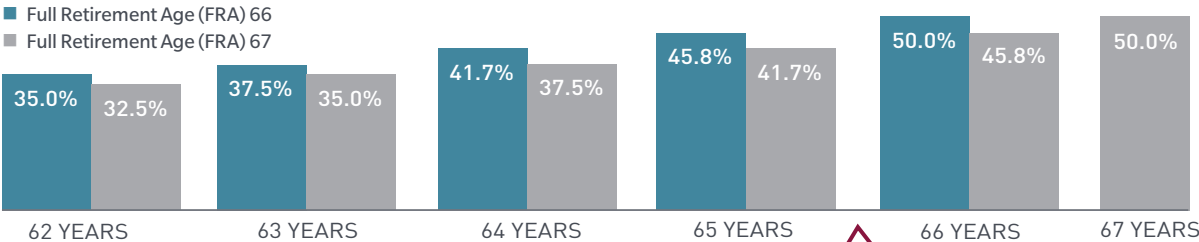
What are the requirements to receive a spousal benefit?

In order to receive a spousal benefit your spouse must be receiving their retirement or disability benefit and you must be age 62 or older. If both spouses worked, Social Security will usually pay you an amount that equals the higher of your retirement or spousal benefit.²

How much can I receive as a spousal benefit?

It depends on your age when you apply. As shown below, the minimum spousal benefit is available at age 62 and is 32.5%–35% of your spouse’s retirement benefit at their Full Retirement Age (FRA). The maximum spousal benefit is 50% of your spouse’s FRA benefit if you claim at your FRA. If you receive a spousal benefit before you reach FRA, it will be reduced and will not increase when you reach FRA.

Spousal percentages by age (Hypothetical Example)



FRA for spousal benefits is age 66 for anyone born 1943 to 1954. It increases by two months for every year from 1955 to 1959. FRA is age 67 for anyone born in 1960 or later.

Will my spouse’s retirement benefit be reduced if I receive a spousal benefit?

No. If you receive a spousal benefit, it will not reduce your spouse’s retirement benefit.

How are spousal benefits calculated?

The spousal benefit is based on your spouse’s benefit at their FRA, regardless of whether your spouse claimed before, at or after their FRA. The percent you receive is based on your age when you apply for or become eligible for a spousal benefit.

Calculating Spousal Benefits (Hypothetical Example)

Spousal benefit based on Higher Earner’s benefit at FRA

	HIGHER EARNER CLAIMS AT 62 RECEIVES \$700	HIGHER EARNER CLAIMS AT 67 RECEIVES \$1000	HIGHER EARNER CLAIMS AT 70 RECEIVES \$1,240
Spousal benefit at 62 ³	\$325	\$325	\$325
Spousal benefit at 67 ⁴	\$500	\$500	\$500

For illustrative purposes only. Assumes an FRA of 67. Calculations may vary if your FRA is different.

In this hypothetical example, the higher earner’s monthly retirement benefit at age 67 (their FRA) would be \$1,000. If the higher earner claimed at age 62, the monthly benefit would be \$700. If the higher earner claimed at age 70, the monthly benefit would be \$1,240. The maximum spousal benefit would be \$500 per month, regardless of whether the higher earner applies for the retirement benefit at age 62, 67 or 70. The minimum spousal benefit would be \$325 per month.

If both my spouse and I worked and paid into Social Security, how can I estimate if I will receive a spousal or retirement benefit?

The Social Security Administration (SSA) compares your retirement benefit at your FRA to the maximum spousal benefit off your spouse. The maximum spousal benefit is 50% of your spouse’s retirement benefit at their FRA. If the maximum spousal benefit is greater than your retirement benefit at your FRA, you may be eligible for a spousal benefit.

² The option to start with the spousal benefit and switch to your retirement benefit was only available to people born on or before 1/1/1954.
³ 32.5% of Higher Earner’s retirement benefit at age 67.
⁴ 50% of Higher Earner’s retirement benefit at age 67.

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Both spouses worked: Coordinating spousal and retirement benefits

HAS YOUR SPOUSE APPLIED FOR THEIR RETIREMENT BENEFIT?	
YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You receive an amount that equals the greater of your retirement or spousal benefit
NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start with your retirement benefit When your spouse applies, top off existing amount with excess spousal benefit⁵

Can I start with my spousal benefit and then switch to my retirement benefit?

Generally, no. Only people born on or before January 1, 1954 were eligible to start with their spousal benefit and switch to their retirement benefit later on. If you were born after that date, the SSA will give you the highest available benefit.

What if I apply before my spouse applies?

You would start with your retirement benefit. When your spouse applies, the SSA tops off your current amount with an excess spousal benefit. The excess spousal benefit = (max spousal) - (your retirement benefit at FRA). After your spouse applies, the new total amount = (your current benefit) + (excess spousal benefit).⁵ See the following case study for more information.



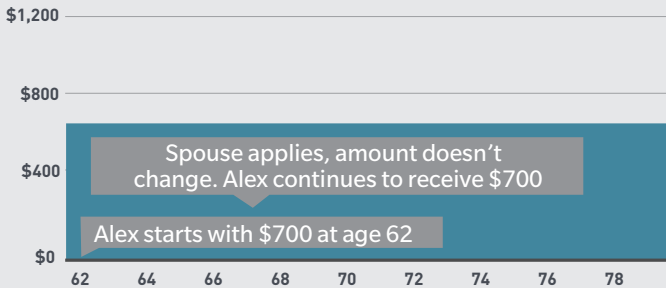
CASE STUDY

Alex and Blake are age 62 and retired. They want to know what they may receive if they apply for Social Security now, and when each of their spouses applies. Alex and Blake will be Full Retirement Age (FRA) when their spouses apply.

■ Retirement benefit ■ Spousal benefit

Alex Retirement Benefit at FRA \$1,000 / Spousal Benefit at FRA \$1,000

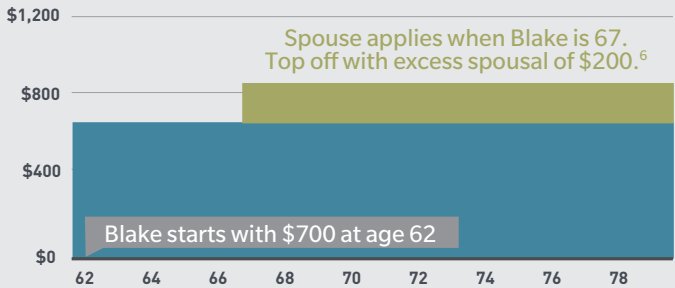
Spousal benefit at FRA < retirement benefit at FRA --> No excess spousal benefit.



Alex applies at 62. Because Alex's spouse has not applied, Alex's only option is to receive a reduced retirement benefit of \$700. When Alex's spouse applies, the SSA compares Alex's spousal benefit at FRA to the retirement benefit at FRA. Since the spousal benefit is not higher, there is not an excess spousal benefit and the amount doesn't change when Alex's spouse applies. Regardless of when Alex or the spouse claims Social Security, Alex will not receive a spousal benefit.

Blake Retirement Benefit at FRA \$1,000 / Spousal Benefit at FRA \$1,200

Spousal benefit at FRA > retirement benefit at FRA --> top off with excess spousal benefit of \$200.⁶



Blake applies at 62. Because Blake's spouse has not applied, Blake's only option is to receive a reduced retirement benefit of \$700. When Blake's spouse applies, the SSA compares the spousal benefit at FRA to the retirement benefit at FRA. In this case the spousal benefit is \$200 higher. This \$200 will be added to Blake's current retirement benefit for a total of \$900 (\$700 (retirement benefit) + \$200 (excess spousal benefit)).⁶

⁵ If you are younger than FRA when your spouse applies, the excess spousal benefit will be reduced.

⁶ If Blake was under FRA when the spouse applied, the excess spousal benefit would be reduced.

Social Security Spousal Benefits FAQ

Can I receive the maximum survivors benefit even if I am receiving a reduced spousal or retirement benefit?

Yes, even if you are receiving a reduced spousal or retirement benefit, you are still eligible for the maximum survivors benefit. Please refer to the MFS® “Social Security Benefits for Widows and Widowers” FAQ for more information.

Hypothetical example

Frances applied for Social Security at age 62 and was receiving a reduced spousal benefit. Frances is now age 67 and Frances’s spouse recently passed away. Because Frances has reached FRA when applying for the survivors benefit, Frances is eligible for 100% of the deceased spouse’s retirement benefit.

Working and receiving a spousal benefit

Can I receive a spousal benefit if I worked?

Yes. If you worked and paid into Social Security, you generally receive the greater of your retirement or spousal benefits. Please see the previous sections for more information.

Can I receive a spousal benefit if I never worked?

Yes, you can receive a spousal benefit if you never worked. Your spouse must be receiving their retirement or disability benefit and you must be age 62 or older.

Can I work and receive a spousal benefit at the same time?

Yes, but if you are under Full Retirement Age (FRA) and your earnings after you apply for Social Security are greater than \$21,240 in 2023 (\$1,770 per month if this is your first year of receiving Social Security), your Social Security benefit (including spousal and retirement) may be partially or fully withheld.⁷ Once you reach FRA, you can earn as much as you want and your Social Security benefits will not be withheld.

If my spouse is working, could that affect my retirement or spousal benefit?

Your spouse’s wages will not affect your retirement benefit. However, if your spouse is working, under FRA and collecting Social Security, the earnings test may cause some or all of your spouse’s benefit to be withheld, as well as the spousal benefit you receive off him or her.

Can I receive a spousal benefit if I worked in a government position that did not pay into Social Security?

Perhaps. If you worked in a government position that did not pay into Social Security, your spousal benefit will be reduced by two-thirds of your government pension. Please refer to the SSA publication “Government Pension Offset” for more information.

Work and Social Security earnings test*

AGE	2023 EARNINGS LIMITS	WITHHOLDING
Under Full Retirement Age for the full year**	\$21,240 (\$1,770 per month)**	\$1 in benefits withheld for every \$2 in earnings above limit
Reach Full Retirement Age during 2023**	\$56,520 (\$4,710 per month)**	\$1 in benefits withheld for every \$3 in earnings above limit

* Earnings test applies to any benefit (retirement, spousal) received before FRA. For married couples, the SSA only counts the wages of the spouse receiving a Social Security benefit. If your retirement benefit is withheld due to the earnings test, the spousal benefit that your spouse receives off you is also withheld.

**Special earnings monthly limit may apply the first calendar year. This limits monthly earnings to \$1,770 starting in the month Social Security benefit begins and ending in December. If earnings exceed \$1,770 in any remaining month of the calendar year, you won’t be entitled to any benefit for that month.

⁷ \$56,520 if you turn FRA this year. Earnings limit applies only to earnings received after you start Social Security.

For more information and answers to your questions about Social Security benefits, visit ssa.gov.

For help determining what role Social Security benefits will play in your financial future, work closely with your financial advisor or investment professional. They will provide the perspective you need to help you build and maintain a retirement strategy that may work best for you.

For informational use only. MFS does not provide tax, legal, retirement or Social Security advice. Contact the Social Security Administration at 1-800-772-1213 or go to ssa.gov to determine the benefits that may be available to you and your spouse.