

# Social Security Benefits for Widows and Widowers FAQ


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With increased life expectancy and years spent in retirement, Social Security benefits are likely to make up a growing share of your retirement income. If you are a widow, widower or dependent of a worker who has died, you may be eligible to receive Social Security survivors benefits. Discuss with your financial advisor whether you may be eligible for these benefits, and if you are, what steps you can take to maximize them as part of your overall retirement plan. For more information on how eligible children and other dependents can claim survivors benefits, see the Social Security Administration's publication "Benefits for Children," available online.

## Overview

### What are the requirements to receive a survivors benefit?

- You are eligible for a survivors benefit even if you never worked
- You must be married to your current spouse for at least the nine months before they passed away (ten years if divorced)<sup>1</sup>
- You must be age 60 or older (50 if you are disabled) or have a "child-in-care"<sup>2</sup>

## WIDOW(ER)S BENEFITS OVERVIEW

<b>Minimum benefit</b>	71.5% at age 60 (50 if you are disabled)
<b>Maximum benefit</b>	Limited to what the deceased would receive if they were still alive
<b>Survivors benefit amount based on</b>	Age at which the deceased claimed Social Security retirement benefits. If the deceased was receiving disability benefits, the survivor benefit is based on the deceased's disability benefit. Note: The greater the deceased's benefit, the greater the survivors benefit.
<b>Survivors benefit percentage based on</b>	Age you claim the survivors benefit Note: The age that you claim your spousal or retirement benefit does not impact the percent you receive through the survivors benefit.

<sup>1</sup> See MFS' piece "Social Security Divorced Spouse Benefits" for more information on options available to divorced spouses.

<sup>2</sup> Child-in-care benefits may be available to a current spouse or ex-spouse who is taking care of a child of the deceased who is under the age of 16 or disabled. Child-in-care benefits are calculated differently than the survivors benefits mentioned in this piece. Please be aware that the earnings limit applies to any benefit received by the parent before their Full Retirement Age. Please see the Social Security Publication "Benefits for Children" for more information.

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### Calculating survivors benefits

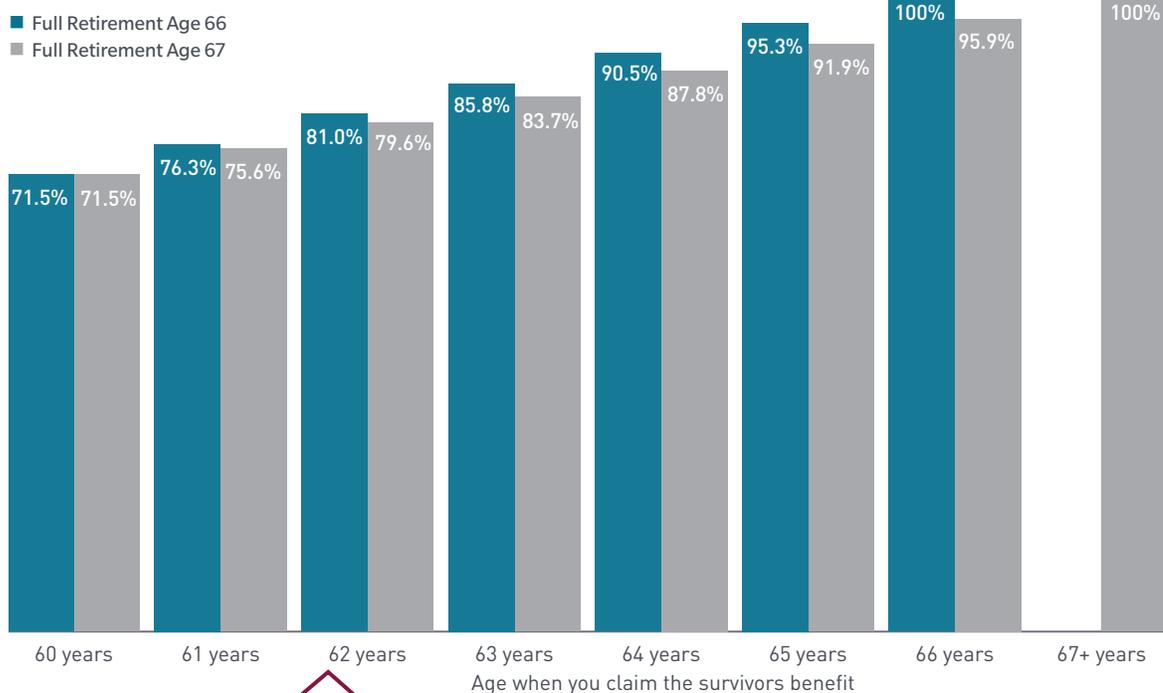
#### How are survivors benefits calculated?

In order to receive a survivors benefit, you must be age 60 or older (50 if you are disabled).<sup>3</sup> Then the Social Security Administration (SSA) bases the survivors benefit on two things: 1) the percent you receive is based on your age when you apply for the survivors benefit and 2) the amount you receive is based on the deceased's Social Security benefit.

#### What percent of the deceased's benefit can I receive as a surviving spouse?

It depends on your age when you apply for the survivors benefit. The minimum you can receive is 71.5% of the deceased's benefit if you are age 60 (50 if you are disabled) when you claim the survivor's benefit. The maximum you can receive as a surviving spouse is up to 100% of the deceased's benefit if you claim the survivors benefit at the widow(er)s Full Retirement Age (FRA).<sup>4</sup> If you worked, you will receive the greater of the survivors benefit or your retirement benefit.

#### Survivors' percentages by widow(er)'s claiming age



**FRA for survivors benefit is age 66 for anyone born 1945–1956. It increases by two months for every year from 1957 to 1961. FRA is age 67 for anyone born 1962 or later.**

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

Yes, even if you are receiving a reduced retirement or spousal benefit, you are still eligible for the maximum survivors benefit if you are FRA or older when you apply for the survivors benefit. After your spouse passes away, you will receive the greater of your retirement benefit or survivors benefit off your spouse.<sup>5</sup>

#### Hypothetical example

Maria applied for Social Security at age 62 and was receiving a reduced spousal benefit off her husband Michael. She is now age 67 and Michael recently passed away. Because Maria has reached her FRA when she applies for her survivors benefit, she is eligible for 100% of Michael's retirement benefit.

<sup>3</sup> If there are children under the age of 16 or disabled before the age of 22, a child-in-care benefit may be available to the surviving spouse if they are taking care of the deceased's biological or adopted child or (in certain cases) step-child. Please refer to the SSA publication "Survivors Benefits" for more information.

<sup>4</sup> Earnings limit applies to any benefit received before Full Retirement Age.

<sup>5</sup> If you are currently receiving a spousal benefit off your spouse, the SSA will automatically switch you to the survivors benefit upon notification of death. Under most circumstances, the funeral home will report the person's death to the SSA. If you are receiving retirement or disability benefits on your own record, you will need to apply in person for survivors benefits.

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### My spouse claimed Social Security before they passed away. How is the survivors benefit calculated?

The survivors benefit is based on when the deceased claimed their retirement benefit. The greater the deceased's retirement benefit, the greater the survivors benefit.

- If the deceased claimed their retirement benefit *before* their Full Retirement Age (FRA)<sup>6</sup>, the maximum survivors benefit is limited to the higher of what the deceased was receiving at death or 82.5% of the deceased's FRA benefit.<sup>7</sup> Please contact the Social Security Administration (SSA) for more information.
- If the deceased claimed their retirement benefit *at or after* FRA, the survivors benefit is based on the amount the deceased was receiving at death. The percent you receive is based on your age when you claim the survivors benefit.

The following chart illustrates how the survivors benefit may be impacted by the deceased's age when they claim Social Security.

### Impact of claiming decision on survivor

Hypothetical survivors benefits based on deceased's claiming age



Based on average PIA (Primary Insurance Amount) for males at age 66.  
Source: Social Security Administration Statistical Supplement 2019.

### My spouse did not claim Social Security before they passed away. How is the survivors benefit calculated?

It depends on if your spouse passed away before or after FRA.

- If your spouse passed away *before* FRA: The survivors benefit is based on what the deceased would have received as a retirement benefit at FRA.<sup>8</sup> The percent you receive is based on your age when you claim the survivor benefit.
- If your spouse passed away *at or after* FRA: The survivors benefit is based on what the deceased would have received on the date of their death. The percent you receive is based on your age when you claim the survivors benefit.

#### Hypothetical example

Larry passed away at age 68 without claiming his retirement benefit. The survivors benefit for his wife Leigh would be based on the amount Larry would have received at age 68.

### Can I receive both my retirement benefit and the survivors benefit?

No, you will receive the greater of your retirement or survivors benefit.

### What if I remarry?

If you remarry before age 60, you forfeit the survivors benefits off your deceased spouse. If you remarry after age 60, you retain the survivors benefit off your deceased spouse. In that case you will receive the greater of your retirement benefit, the survivors benefit off your deceased spouse or the spousal/survivors benefit off your current spouse.

<sup>6</sup> FRA for retirement and spousal benefits is age 66 if you were born between 1943 and 1954. It gradually increases by two months for every year between 1955 and 1959. It is age 67 if you were born in 1960 or later.

<sup>7</sup> Under the widow(er) limit, the surviving spouse receives the lesser of 1) the widow(er) percent based off the deceased's FRA benefit or 2) the greater of the benefit the deceased was receiving at death or 82.5% of the deceased's FRA benefit.

<sup>8</sup> If the deceased was receiving disability benefits, the survivors benefit is based on the deceased's disability benefit.

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### Can I start with my retirement benefit and then switch to my survivors benefit? How about vice versa?

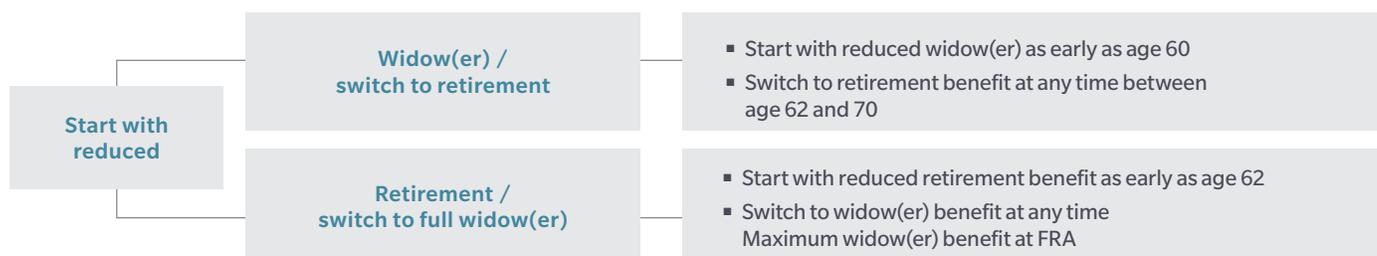
In some cases, a surviving spouse may start with one benefit and switch to another. For example,

- you may be able to start with reduced survivors benefit as early as age 60, and then switch to your retirement benefit at any time between age 62 and 70
- you may also be able to start with your reduced retirement benefit as early as age 62, and then switch to your survivors benefit

If you will be using one of these strategies, please ask the SSA for information on how to restrict the scope of your application. Otherwise, the SSA will give you the greater of the two benefits.

Please also note that if you are under Full Retirement Age (FRA) there may be limits on how much you can earn. Contact the SSA for more information and to see if either strategy is available.

### Widow(er) switch-up options<sup>9</sup>



### Working and receiving the survivors benefit

#### Can I work and receive the survivors benefit?

A special earnings limitation applies before FRA. If you continue to work and you are under FRA and earned more than \$18,240 in 2020, your retirement benefit as well as the survivors benefit may be temporarily withheld.<sup>10</sup> After you reach FRA, you can earn as much as you want without any withholding.

#### What if I worked in a government position that did not pay into Social Security?

If you worked in a position that did not pay into Social Security and your spouse worked in the private sector, your survivors benefit may be reduced by two-thirds of your government pension. Please refer to Social Security's publication "Government Pension Offset" for more information.

#### Can I receive the survivors benefit even if I never worked?

Yes. Even if you never worked, you can receive the survivors benefit.

#### What if the deceased received a military pension?

Survivors benefits may affect benefits payable under the Department of Defense Survivors Benefit Plan. Check with the Department of Defense or the appropriate military retirement advisor for more information.

### Work and Social Security (earnings test)\*

AGE	2020 EARNINGS LIMITS	WITHHOLDING
Through the year before turning Full Retirement Age	<b>\$18,240</b> (\$1,520 per month)**	Withheld by \$1 for every \$2 of earnings above the limit
In year of turning Full Retirement Age	<b>\$48,600</b> (\$4,050 per month)**	Withheld by \$1 for every \$3 of earnings above the limit

\*Earnings test applies to any benefit (retirement, spousal, survivors, divorcee) received before Full Retirement Age. Earnings test is based on earned income only. Dividend, capital gains, rental income, distributions from IRAs and workplace retirement plans, etc. may not be counted as earned income. Severance pay is counted as earned income. Unemployment benefits are an entitlement benefit and are not counted as earned income. Please contact a qualified tax advisor for more information on earned income.

\*\*Special earnings monthly limit may apply the first calendar year.

For more information and answers to your questions about Social Security benefits, visit [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov).

For help determining what role Social Security benefits will play in your financial future, work closely with your financial 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 [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov) to determine the benefits that may be available to you and your spouse.

<sup>9</sup> Earnings limit applies to any benefit received before Full Retirement Age.

<sup>10</sup> \$48,600 if you turn 66 in 2020. Earnings limit applies only to earnings received after you start receiving Social Security benefits.