Social Security widow benefit

3 keys to helping a surviving spouse maximize their benefit

Key highlights:

Household Social Security benefits drop when one spouse passes away.

It's important to help the survivor maximize their remaining benefit.

You will need to know the deceased spouse's PIA, whether they had already filed and if so, when.

One of the most important tasks in the financial planning process is creating a plan for a surviving spouse. There are several layers of complexity to the Social Security widow benefit that make it tricky to provide guidance on that income source. This white paper aims to clarify the steps for determining a surviving spouse's benefit and your opportunity to maximize it.

Assuming that both spouses were eligible for Social Security benefits, it's a simple fact that household Social Security benefits — whether already incoming or anticipated in the future — will drop when one spouse passes away. The surviving spouse will need to determine whether the widow benefit is greater than their own benefit and file accordingly.

There are 3 keys to helping a survivor maximize their remaining Social Security benefits.

1. What is the maximum widow benefit?

The maximum widow benefit depends on a number of aspects and is often learned by contacting the Social Security Administration after one spouse passes away. It's determined first by considering whether (and if so, when) the deceased had filed for benefits.

If the deceased spouse had claimed after full retirement age (FRA), the widow benefit will include the delayed retirement credits the decedent had earned.

If the decedent had filed early, the widow benefit will reflect the corresponding reduction in benefits. While the calculation can get complex, it's important to understand that the maximum widow benefit will be the higher of either:

- The deceased's reduced benefit
- 82.5% of the decedent's PIA

If the deceased spouse **had not yet claimed** at the time of their death, the widow benefit will be the higher of the deceased spouse's:

- PIA
- Benefit at date of death, including delayed retirement credits if decedent died after FRA

2. At what age is the survivor claiming? And what is the widow FRA?

Widow benefits can be claimed as early as age 60, but claiming before the survivor's FRA will cause a reduction in benefits (as low as 71.5% of the full widow benefit).

Depending on the surviving spouse's age, their "widow FRA" may be different from their usual FRA. (It often allows the widow to file a little earlier.) The Social Security Administration will do this calculation for you. Visit ssa.gov/benefits/survivors/onyourown and choose the surviving spouse's birth year from the drop-down in the left column **(Find your full retirement age)**. Age-specific details will be provided showing how much the widow benefit would be reduced based on the age at which the survivor begins taking widow benefits.

There is also other helpful information regarding widow benefits on the ssa.gov website.

3. Is the survivor dually eligible?

Sometimes a surviving spouse qualifies for both a widow benefit and their own benefit. The Social Security rules allow a survivor to claim one benefit at a time, either the widow benefit or their own benefit, while waiting to take the other one at a later date when that benefit would be higher. Whichever way they file, if the survivor is still working, their earnings could result in withholding from their benefit.

Examples:

- A surviving spouse could start their widow benefit as early as age 60 and switch to their own benefit at any age from 62 to 70.
- A surviving spouse could start their own benefit as early as age 62 and switch to the widow benefit at any time up to their widow FRA.

Conclusion

While there are many variables, a simplified way to think of the widow benefit is that the surviving spouse receives the higher of their own benefit or the benefit of the deceased — which may have been reduced or increased, depending on whether and when the deceased had filed for Social Security benefits.

Finding the best possible claiming strategy is important to your widowed clients. Nationwide's Social Security 360 Analyzer® tool can run these calculations to show your clients different filing strategies. These scenarios could also be enlightening for your married clients to see what claiming early can do to future widow benefits.

Identify optimal filing strategies for your clients by visiting NationwideFinancial.com/SocialSecurity.

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