

Beyond Annuities: Understanding Social Security Survivor Benefits



At MassMutual Ascend, we understand the importance of a secure future. That's why we don't just offer products to help you reach your goals – we also provide educational tools and resources that can help you navigate your future with confidence, whatever life may throw your way.

The loss of a spouse can be devastating both emotionally and financially – but Social Security can help ease the financial burden by providing income to the surviving spouse, known as survivor benefits.

There are several factors that play into eligibility for survivor benefits, and the amount the survivor may be eligible for. In this brochure, we'll cover the basics on eligibility, how benefits are calculated, and when and how to apply for benefits.



Eligibility for survivor benefits

Many people don't realize that, in addition to spouses, ex-spouses may be eligible for survivor benefits based on the deceased's work history. Here's a summary of requirements for eligibility for spouses, ex-spouses and ex-spouses who have remarried:



Spouses

In general, as long as the surviving spouse is age 60 or older (or, if disabled, age 50-59) and was married to the deceased for at least nine months prior to death, they will be eligible for survivor benefits.



Ex-spouses

In general, as long as the surviving ex-spouse is age 60 or older (or, if disabled, age 50-59) and was married to the deceased for at least ten years, they will be eligible for survivor benefits.



Ex-spouses who have remarried

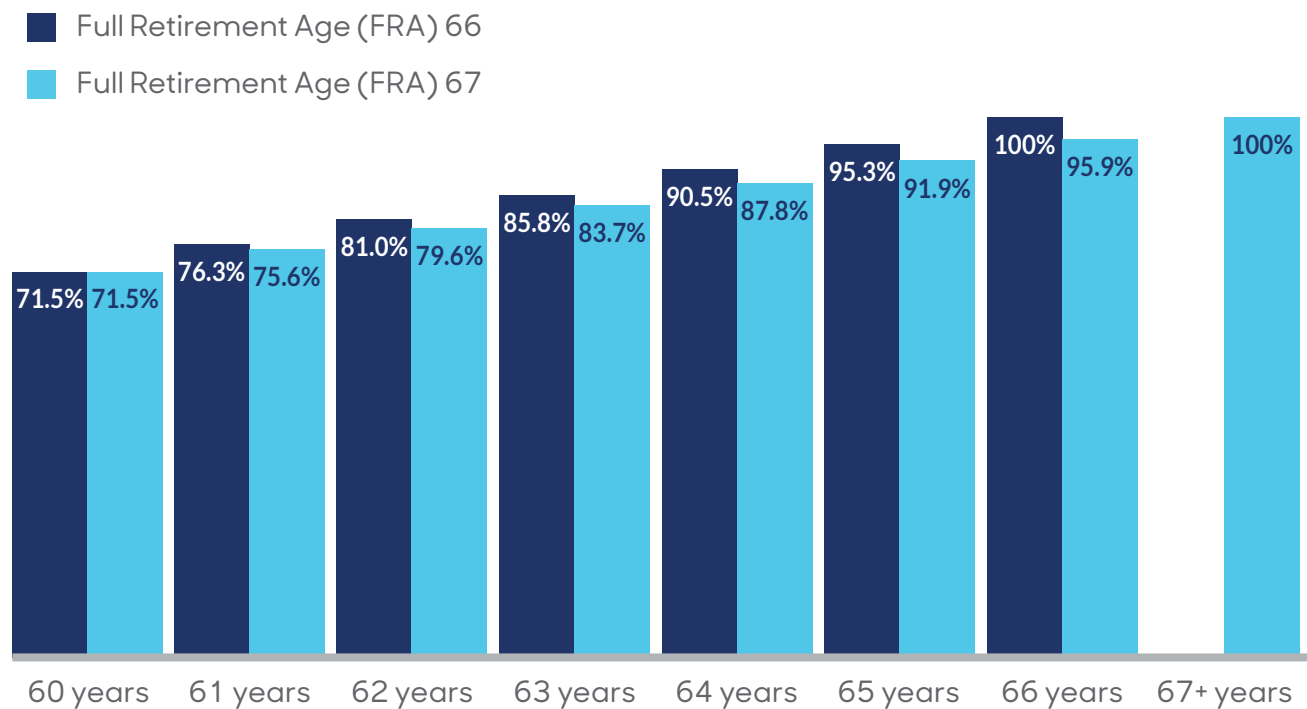
Typically, remarrying prior to age 60 (or, if disabled, age 50) disqualifies the surviving spouse from receiving survivor benefits. But, if the surviving spouse remarries after age 60 (or, if disabled, 50), they will most likely be eligible for survivor benefits based on their former spouse's work. Additionally, once the surviving spouse is age 62, they will be eligible to collect benefits for their new spouse's work, if those benefits would be greater.

Calculating survivor benefits

Survivor benefits are based on the deceased spouse's Social Security benefit amount. Payments start at 71.5% of the deceased's benefit and increase the longer the surviving spouse waits to apply, up to 100% at the surviving spouse's Full Retirement Age (FRA) for survivor benefits.

The FRA for survivor benefits (which differs slightly from FRA for regular Social Security benefits), is age 66 for anyone born 1945-1956, and increases by two months for every birth year from 1957-1961, and is 67 for anyone born 1962 or later. Here's a breakdown of payment eligibility percentages by age, for FRA 66 and 67.

Survivor eligibility percentages by claiming age



When to claim survivor benefits

In some cases, there is no decision to be made when it comes to claiming survivor benefits. If both the surviving spouse and the deceased had already claimed Social Security retirement benefits and were over age 70 when the deceased passed away, the surviving spouse would continue to receive the larger of the two benefits for the rest of their life.

Depending on the situation, a survivor may choose to start with their survivor benefit, and then switch to their own retirement benefit — or vice versa — to maximize expected lifetime benefits.

Example Switch-Up Strategies

A survivor may start with reduced survivor benefits as early as age 60, and then switch to their own retirement benefit at any point between age 62 and 70.

Reduced survivor benefit
as early as age 60



Own retirement benefit
any time age 62-70

Alternatively, they may start with their own reduced retirement benefit as early as age 62, and then switch to their survivor benefit at any time.

Own reduced retirement benefit
as early as age 62



Survivor benefit
at any time

In other cases, the surviving spouse may need income immediately and choose to claim the greatest benefit available to them at that time. But when possible and if income isn't needed right away, waiting to claim or utilizing a switch strategy to maximize lifetime benefits may be worthwhile.

How to claim survivor benefits

If a survivor is already collecting Social Security benefits as a spouse based on their spouse's work, the Social Security Administration will automatically update their benefits to survivor benefits when the spouse's death is reported. If the survivor is already collecting benefits based on their own work, they should contact the Social Security Administration to see if they can maximize expected benefits by switching to survivor benefits.

If a survivor is not yet collecting any kind of Social Security benefits, they should contact the Social Security Administration promptly, because for some claims, benefits will be paid from the date of application, not from the date of death.

Here's a summary of the information the Social Security Administration needs in order to process a survivor benefit application:

- Proof of death – either from a funeral home or a death certificate
- The survivor's Social Security number, and the deceased spouse's social security number
- The survivor's birth certificate
- Marriage certificate
- Divorce papers, if applying as a surviving divorced spouse
- The deceased spouse's W-2 forms or federal self-employment tax return for the most recent year
- The survivor's bank and account number, so benefits can be direct deposited

\$255 ONE-TIME DEATH BENEFIT

If the deceased spouse worked for a long enough period of time and the surviving spouse meets certain requirements, they can collect a one-time death benefit of \$255. This benefit must be applied for within two years of the deceased spouse's death. Survivors should be sure to call the Social Security Administration upon their spouse's death to see if they are eligible for this benefit.



To learn more about Social Security survivor benefits and to get answers about your specific circumstances, contact the Social Security Administration at 1-800-772-1213.

In addition, consult with your financial professional about how Social Security will play into your financial future, and about other tools to help bridge any possible income gaps. In some cases, an annuity may be an appropriate addition to your financial portfolio – providing a guaranteed income stream and helping to ensure you don't run out of money in retirement.

All situations are unique, and this brochure only provides general information. Therefore, you should consult with qualified professionals who can provide advice relevant to your specific circumstances. For information on your specific Social Security survivor benefits eligibility, contact the Social Security Administration.

Sources:

<https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10084.pdf>

SocialSecurity.gov, "Who can get Survivor benefits," 2024.

SocialSecurity.gov, "What you could get from Survivor benefits," 2024.

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For use with contract forms P1020203NW, P1020212ID, ICC25-P1174525NW, P1138919NW, P1138919ID, ICC24-P1172524NW, P1088011NW, P1088011ID, P1088111NW, P1088111ID, ICC22-P1165322NW, P1123117NW, P1123117ID, P1123217NW, P1123217ID, ICC21-P1152221NW, ICC24-P1172024NW, ICC21-P1151521NW, P1086811NW, P1086811ID, P1081610NW, P1081610ID, ICC21-P1151621NW, P1074514NW, P1074514ID, P1470017NW, P1470017ID, ICC21-P1152021NW, ICC21-P1152121NW, ICC21-P1476721NW, P1140119NW, P1140119ID, P1140219NW, P1140219ID, P1146620NW, P1146620ID, P1110416NW, P1110416ID, ICC20-P1144420NW and ICC20-P1144420NW-NoMVA, ICC20-P1144520NW and ICC20-P1144520NW-NoMVA, ICC20-P1474420NW and ICC20-P1474420NW-NoMVA, P1134618NW, P1134618ID and P1134618ID-NoMVA, P1112916NW, P1112916ID, P1129918NW, P1129918ID and P1129918ID-NoMVA, ICC24-P1825224NW, ICC24-P1833624NW, ICC24-P1850824NW, P1841722NW, P1841722NW and ICC24-P1841624NW. Form numbers vary by state.

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