



2026 EDITION · FREE RESOURCE

Social Security Optimization Checklist

47 proven steps to maximize your lifetime Social Security benefit — before you file a single form

\$182K

AVG LIFETIME
DIFFERENCE

47

ACTIONABLE
CHECKLIST ITEMS

8

STRATEGY
CATEGORIES

RC

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WHY THIS MATTERS

The Single Biggest Retirement Decision Most People Get Wrong

Social Security is not a one-size-fits-all benefit. The SSA will pay you what you ask for — but it will never tell you if there's a better strategy available. That responsibility falls entirely on you. Most retirees leave \$50,000–\$200,000+ on the table simply because they didn't know to ask the right questions.



The Core Insight: Claiming Social Security is less about picking an age and more about understanding how your benefit interacts with your spouse's benefit, your tax situation, your health, your other income sources, and the SSA's complex rules. This checklist walks you through every variable — so you claim at exactly the right time, in exactly the right way.

 **What This Checklist Covers**

8 strategic categories covering every factor that should influence your Social Security decision — from your earnings record to survivor planning.

 **Who Should Use This**

Anyone age 60+ who is still working, recently retired, or approaching retirement and hasn't yet filed for Social Security benefits.

 **How Long It Takes**

Set aside 60–90 minutes to work through each section carefully. Gather your most recent SSA statement before you begin.

 **What You'll Know After**

You'll have a clear picture of the gaps in your current plan and the specific strategies that could increase your lifetime benefit.

 **HOW TO USE THIS CHECKLIST**

1

Print or save this PDF so you can check off items as you complete them.

2

Work section by section — don't skip ahead. Each section builds on the last.

3

Note gaps with a star (★) — these are the items to discuss with your RSSA® analyst.

4

Score yourself on page 6 to see exactly where you stand before scheduling your analysis.



Section 1: Earnings Record & Benefit Verification

Your benefit is only as accurate as your earnings history



Create your my Social Security account at SSA.gov

CRITICAL

This is your official gateway to your earnings history, benefit estimates, and filing tools. Do this before anything else.



Download and review your full Social Security statement

CRITICAL

Check every year of earnings listed. Errors are common — especially for self-employed, gig workers, or those who changed employers frequently.



Verify you have 35 or more years of earnings on record

IMPORTANT

SSA uses your highest 35 years to calculate your benefit. Years with \$0 earnings are included as zeros — reducing your average significantly.



Identify any zero or low-earning years that could be replaced

IMPORTANT

If you have zero years and are still working, continuing to work (even part-time) can replace those zeros and permanently increase your benefit.



Report any earnings discrepancies to the SSA in writing

IMPORTANT

Request Form SSA-7008 to correct your earnings record. The statute of limitations applies — don't delay.



Note your Full Retirement Age (FRA)

IMPORTANT

FRA is 67 for anyone born in 1960 or later. This is the benchmark for all benefit increase/reduction calculations.



Section 2: Claiming Age Analysis

The decision that can be worth \$100,000+ over your lifetime



Calculate your break-even age for each claiming scenario

Typically age 80–84 for early vs. FRA, and 82–86 for FRA vs. 70.



Confirm your Delayed Retirement Credit potential (up to 8%/yr)

Delaying from 67 to 70 permanently increases your benefit by 24%.



Model 3 claiming age scenarios: 62, FRA, and 70

Run the numbers side by side before deciding.



Account for early filing reduction (up to -30% at 62)

This reduction is permanent and applies to all future COLAs.



Pro Tip: A 1-year delay in claiming between ages 62–70 increases your benefit by 5–8% per year — plus all future cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) are applied to the higher base amount. The power of delay compounds.



Section 3: Spousal Benefit Strategies

Couples can dramatically increase combined lifetime income with the right coordination



Determine if the lower-earning spouse qualifies for a spousal benefit (up to 50% of higher earner's FRA benefit)

CRITICAL

Spousal benefit is available even if the lower-earning spouse never worked. Must be at least 62 and the higher earner must have filed.



Model a coordinated "stagger" strategy for couples with income gap

CRITICAL

Often: lower earner claims early (for cash flow), higher earner delays to 70 (for maximum survivor benefit). This is frequently worth \$50,000+.



Check if you're eligible for divorced spousal benefits (if married 10+ years)

IMPORTANT

If your ex-spouse's benefit is higher than your own, you may be entitled to up to 50% of their FRA benefit — without affecting their benefit.



Identify whether spousal benefit or personal benefit will be higher

IMPORTANT

SSA pays the higher of the two — your own record or spousal. You need the numbers to know which applies to you.



Understand the Government Pension Offset (GPO) if applicable

IF APPLICABLE

Affects those who receive a government pension from non-covered employment. Can reduce or eliminate spousal/survivor benefits.



Section 4: Survivor Benefit Planning

For married couples, this may be the most important section



Understand that the surviving spouse keeps only ONE benefit (the larger of the two)

CRITICAL

When one spouse dies, the survivor loses the smaller check. This makes maximizing the higher earner's benefit a legacy planning decision.



Project the income gap the surviving spouse will face

CRITICAL

Model what the household budget looks like after losing the smaller SS check — this often reveals a serious shortfall that needs to be addressed.



Consider whether life insurance or annuity income can bridge the survivor gap

IMPORTANT

Many couples use a combination of delayed SS + life insurance to protect the surviving spouse's income.



Pro Tip: For couples, the #1 goal of a Social Security strategy is often to maximize the survivor benefit — not just the higher earner's benefit in both lifetimes. When you model this, you'll see the impact of this strategy.



Section 5: Tax Impact & Provisional Income

Up to 85% of your benefit can be taxable — are you planning for it?



Calculate your Provisional Income to determine how much SS will be taxed

CRITICAL

Provisional Income = AGI + non-taxable interest + 50% of SS benefits. If over \$44K (married) or \$34K (single), up to 85% of SS is taxable.



Model the tax impact of claiming SS while still working

CRITICAL

If you're under FRA and still earning, the Earnings Test can reduce your benefit by \$1 for every \$2 you earn over the annual limit (\$22,320 in 2026).



Consider Roth conversion strategy before claiming SS

IMPORTANT

Converting traditional IRA funds to Roth in the years before claiming can reduce future provisional income and the taxation of your SS benefit.



Understand the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) if applicable

IF APPLICABLE

WEP affects those who receive a pension from a job not covered by Social Security (many state/local government employees, teachers).



Check your state's Social Security tax rules

IMPORTANT

12 states tax SS benefits at the state level. Oregon has specific rules — verify your state's treatment of SS income.



Section 6: Medicare Coordination

Claiming SS and Medicare timing are more intertwined than most people realize



Understand that Medicare Part B is automatically deducted from SS if you're enrolled in both

CRITICAL

In 2026, standard Part B premium is \$185/mo. IRMAA surcharges can add \$60–\$443/mo based on your income from 2 years prior.



Check if your income 2 years ago triggers IRMAA surcharges

CRITICAL

IRMAA is based on your MAGI from 2 years ago. If you had a high-income event (Roth conversion, business sale, property sale), you may owe surcharges — even if your current income is lower.



File an IRMAA appeal (SSA-44) if your income has dropped significantly

IF APPLICABLE

Life-changing events (retirement, divorce, death of spouse, business closure) qualify you to appeal IRMAA using current-year income instead.



Decide whether to enroll in Medicare Part B at 65 or delay (if still working)

IMPORTANT

If you have creditable employer coverage, you can delay Part B without penalty. Delaying SS



Section 7: Health & Longevity Planning

Your health history is the most personal variable in your SS decision



Honestly assess your current health status and family longevity history

CRITICAL

The break-even calculation only matters if you live past the break-even age. Poor health or short family history may favor earlier claiming.



Run a longevity projection (life expectancy at your current age)

CRITICAL

A 65-year-old man has a 50% chance of living to 85. A 65-year-old woman has a 50% chance of living to 87. Couples: one spouse has a 50% chance of reaching 92.



Factor in long-term care costs when modeling retirement income

IMPORTANT

Average LTC cost in Oregon: \$7,200–\$11,000/month for memory care. Without a plan, LTC costs can deplete savings and leave your spouse with only SS income.



If health is a concern, consider a "file and suspend" vs. early filing analysis

SITUATIONAL

In some scenarios, claiming early and investing the difference can outperform delayed claiming — especially with a shorter time horizon.



Section 8: Retirement Income Integration

SS is one piece of the puzzle — it must fit with your other income sources



Map all retirement income sources: SS, pension, 401(k)/IRA, annuities, part-time work

CRITICAL

Your SS claiming decision should be made in the context of your complete income picture — not in isolation.



Determine if you have a "bridge" income source to fund the delay to age 70

CRITICAL

The best SS strategy often means delaying to 70 — but you need income to live on in the meantime. Identify your bridge: savings, part-time work, annuity, or 401(k) withdrawals.



Check if a Fixed Index Annuity could provide bridge income while you delay SS

IMPORTANT

An annuity with an income rider can guarantee \$X/month starting at a specific date — ideal for covering the gap between retirement and age 70.



Model your Required Minimum Distributions (RMDs) starting at age 73

IMPORTANT

Large RMDs + SS income + other income can push you into a higher tax bracket. Planning now can significantly reduce your lifetime tax burden.



Confirm your estate plan accounts for the SS income that ends at death

IMPORTANT

SS is not an inheritable asset. Ensure your estate plan and beneficiary designations account for the loss of SS income for your heirs and surviving spouse.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

How Ready Are You to Optimize Your Social Security?

Count the items you were able to check off. Your total reveals exactly where you stand — and what a professional Social Security analysis would do for you.

YOUR OPTIMIZATION SCORE

35-47Fully
Optimized**25-34**Nearly
There**15-24**Moderate
Gaps**5-14**Significant
Gaps**0-4**Just
Starting**● 0-14 Checked**

You have major optimization opportunities. An RSSA® analysis could recover \$50,000–\$182,000+ in lifetime benefits.

● 15-34 Checked

You're thinking in the right direction but still have gaps. Targeted strategies could add \$25,000–\$80,000 to your lifetime income.

● 35-47 Checked

You're well-prepared. A professional analysis can confirm your strategy is truly optimal and identify any remaining gaps.

WHAT COMES NEXT

**Schedule Your RSSA® Analysis**

A personalized Social Security optimization analysis with Rodney Cummings, RSSA® — the only nationally credentialed specialist in Oregon. Includes a custom report with your optimal claiming strategy.

**Gather Your Documents**

For your analysis, bring: your SSA statement, most recent tax return, spouse's SSA statement (if applicable), pension information, and a list of all retirement income sources.

**Review Your Star (★) Items**

The items you starred as gaps are your priority discussion points. Bring this checklist to your analysis — it will help Rodney quickly identify where the biggest opportunities are in your situation.

**Share With Your Spouse**

If married, have your spouse complete the checklist independently. Comparing answers often reveals coordination gaps that can be worth tens of thousands of dollars over your combined lifetime.



READY TO MAXIMIZE YOUR BENEFIT?

Don't Leave **\$182,000** on the Table

Schedule your personalized RSSA® Social Security analysis with Rodney Cummings today. As Oregon's only Registered Social Security Analyst, Rodney will model your exact situation and deliver a custom optimization report.

Custom Claiming Strategy Report

Spousal Coordination Analysis

Tax Impact Modeling


Medicare Coordination Review


Break-Even Age Calculations

Survivor Benefit Protection Plan

[Schedule Your Free Consultation →](#)

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Rodney Cummings is a Registered Social Security Analyst (RSSA®). This checklist is for educational purposes only and does not constitute financial, tax, or legal advice. Individual results vary. Always consult with a qualified professional before making Social Security claiming decisions. © 2026

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