

AWM Financial Planning

What is a Health Savings Account?



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Health Savings Accounts (HSAs) can be a valuable asset in retirement planning. An HSA is a type of savings account you can set up to pay for certain health care costs, if you are enrolled in a high deductible health plan. Contributions to an HSA are tax-deductible, any growth is non-taxable, and assets can be withdrawn tax free, as long as you use it for eligible healthcare expenses. The triple tax savings of an HSA is unlike anything else in the tax code.

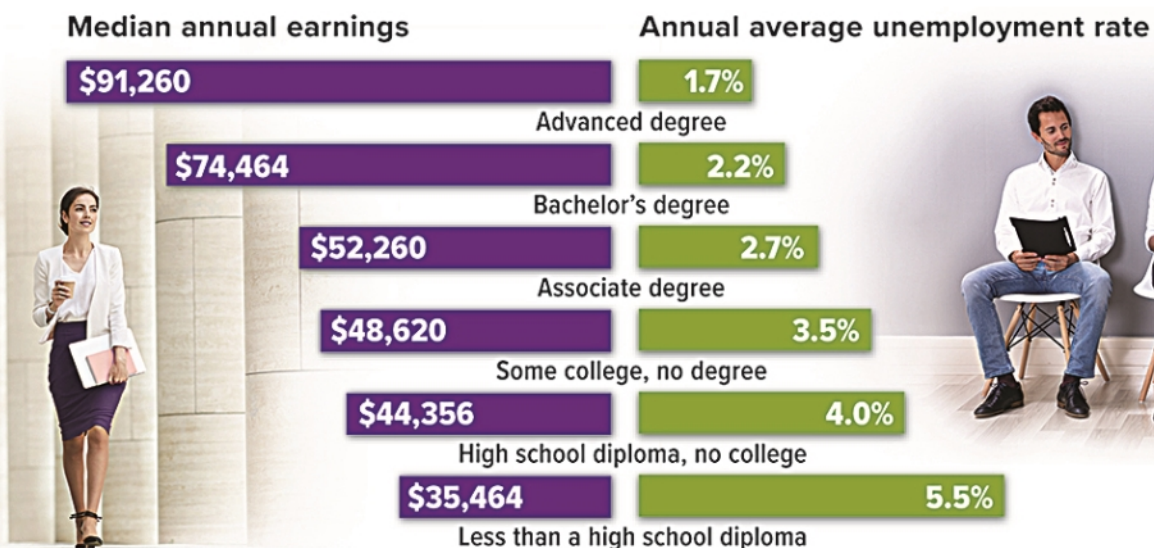
The IRS announced the largest ever increase to the contribution amount for an HSA. For 2024, the maximum contribution will be \$8,300 for a family and \$4,150 for an individual. Participants age 55+ can contribute an extra \$1,000.

If one is able to use other funds to pay healthcare costs, we consider HSAs similar to Roth IRAs but for health expenses. Unlike 401(k)s that make it very easy to invest funds, HSAs are a little harder and not everyone realizes they can be invested. Give us a call to discuss how to best use an HSA.

Education and Earnings

While there is widespread concern about student debt and the cost of higher education, data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics makes a strong case that higher education leads to higher earnings and lower unemployment rates.

In 2022, median annual earnings for a full-time worker with a bachelor's degree were about \$30,000 more than for a worker with only a high school diploma, a difference of more than \$1 million over a 35-year career. Even so, it's important to be realistic about taking on debt in relation to expected earnings, as the job market and potential compensation can vary widely for different fields of study.



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023 (data for ages 25 and older; annual earnings based on usual weekly earnings for full-time wage and salary workers)

SECURE 2.0 Act Expands Early Withdrawal Exceptions

Tax-advantaged retirement accounts such as 401(k) plans and IRAs are intended to promote long-term retirement savings and thus offer preferential tax treatment in return for a commitment to keep savings in the account until at least age 59½. Withdrawals before that age may be subject to a 10% federal income tax penalty on top of ordinary income tax. However, there is a long list of exceptions to this penalty, including several new ones added by the SECURE 2.0 Act of 2022.

Before considering these exceptions, keep in mind that the greatest penalty for early withdrawal from retirement savings could be the loss of future earnings on those savings (see chart). Even so, there are times when tapping retirement savings might be necessary.

Some employer plans allow loans that may be a better solution than an early withdrawal. If a loan or other resources are not available, these exceptions could help. They apply to both employer-sponsored plans and IRAs unless otherwise indicated.

New Exceptions

The SECURE 2.0 Act added the following exceptions to the 10% early withdrawal penalty. Withdrawals covered by these exceptions can be repaid within three years. If the repayment is made after the year of the distribution, an amended return would have to be filed to obtain a refund of any taxes paid.

- **Disaster relief** — up to \$22,000 for expenses related to a federally declared disaster; distributions can be included in gross income equally over three years (effective for disasters on or after January 26, 2021)
- **Terminal illness** — defined as a condition that will cause death within seven years as certified by a physician (effective 2023)
- **Emergency expenses** — one distribution of up to \$1,000 per calendar year for personal or family emergency expenses; no further emergency distributions allowed during three-year repayment period unless funds are repaid or new contributions are at least equal to the withdrawal (effective 2024)
- **Domestic abuse** — the lesser of \$10,000 (indexed for inflation) or 50% of the account value for an account holder who certifies that he or she has been the victim of domestic abuse during the preceding one-year period (effective 2024)

Exceptions Already in Place

These exceptions to the 10% early withdrawal penalty were in effect prior to the SECURE 2.0 Act. They cannot be repaid unless indicated.

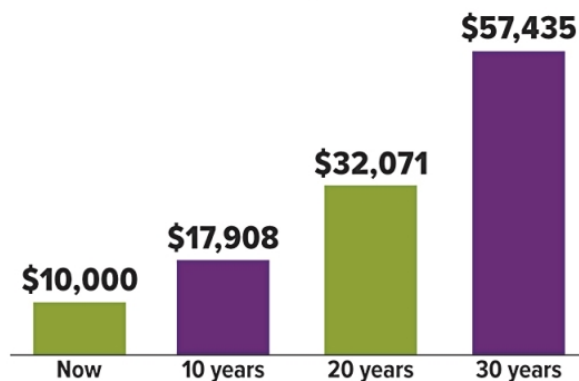
- Death or permanent disability of the account owner
- A series of substantially equal periodic payments for the life of the account holder or the joint lives of the account holder and designated beneficiary

- Unreimbursed medical expenses that exceed 7.5% of adjusted gross income
- Up to \$5,000 for expenses related to the birth or adoption of a child; can be repaid within three years
- Distributions taken by an account holder on active military reserve duty; can be repaid up to two years after end of active duty
- Distributions due to an IRS levy on the account
- (IRA only) Up to \$10,000 lifetime for a first-time homebuyer to buy, build, or improve a home
- (IRA only) Health insurance premiums if unemployed
- (IRA only) Qualified higher education expenses

Lost Opportunity

An early retirement plan withdrawal could end up costing more than you might imagine, even without the 10% penalty. Income taxes will reduce the present value of the withdrawal, and you will lose the potential long-term growth on the amount withdrawn.

Potential lost growth on a \$10,000 withdrawal, assuming 6% annual return



This hypothetical example is used for illustrative purposes only and does not represent the performance of any specific investment. Fees and expenses are not considered and would reduce the performance shown if they were included. Rates of return will vary over time, particularly for long-term investments. Actual results will vary.

Special Exceptions for Employer Accounts

The 10% penalty does not apply for distributions from an employer plan to an employee who leaves a job after age 55, or age 50 for qualified public safety employees. SECURE 2.0 extended the exception to public safety officers with at least 25 years of service with the employer sponsoring the plan, regardless of age, as well as to state and local corrections officers and private-sector firefighters.

Retirement account withdrawals can have complex tax consequences. Consult your tax professional before taking specific action.

How Taxes Impact Your Retirement-Income Strategy

Retirees face several unique challenges when managing their income, particularly when it comes to taxes. From understanding how taxes relate to Social Security and Medicare to determining when to tap taxable and tax-advantaged accounts, individuals must juggle a complicated mix of factors.

Social Security and Medicare

People are sometimes surprised to learn that a portion of Social Security income becomes federally taxable when combined income exceeds \$25,000 for single taxpayers and \$32,000 for married couples filing jointly. The taxable portion is up to 85% of benefits, depending on income and filing status.¹

In addition, the amount retirees pay in Medicare premiums each year is based on the modified adjusted gross income (MAGI) from *two years earlier*. In other words, the cost retirees pay for Medicare in 2023 is based on the MAGI reported on their 2021 returns.

Taxable, Tax-Deferred, or Tax-Free?

Maintaining a mix of taxable, tax-deferred, and tax-free accounts offers flexibility in managing income each year. However, determining when and how to tap each type of account and asset can be tricky. Consider the following points:

Taxable accounts. Income from most dividends and fixed-income investments and gains from the sale of securities held 12 months or less are generally taxed at federal rates as high as 37%. By contrast, qualified dividends and gains from the sale of securities held longer than 12 months are generally taxed at lower capital gains rates, which max out at 20%.

Tax-deferred accounts. Distributions from traditional IRAs, traditional work-sponsored plans, and annuities are also generally subject to federal income tax. On the other hand, company stock held in a qualified work-sponsored plan is typically treated differently. Provided certain rules are followed, a portion of the stock's value is generally taxed at the capital gains rate, no matter when it's sold; however, if the stock is rolled into a traditional IRA, it loses this special tax treatment.²

Tax-free accounts. Qualified distributions from Roth accounts and Health Savings Accounts (HSAs) are tax-free and therefore will not affect Social Security taxability and Medicare premiums. Moreover, some types of fixed-income investments offer tax-free income at the federal and/or state levels.³

The Impact of RMDs

One income-management strategy retirees often follow is to tap taxable accounts in the earlier years of retirement in order to allow the other accounts to continue benefiting from tax-deferred growth. However, traditional IRAs and workplace plans cannot

grow indefinitely. Account holders must begin taking minimum distributions after they reach age 73 (for those who reach age 72 after December 31, 2022). Depending on an account's total value, an RMD could bump an individual or couple into a higher tax bracket. (RMDs are not required from Roth IRAs and, beginning in 2024, work-based plan Roth accounts during the primary account holder's lifetime.)

Don't Forget State Taxes

State taxes are also a factor. Currently, seven states impose no income taxes, while New Hampshire taxes dividend and interest income and Washington taxes the capital gains of high earners. Twelve states tax at least a portion of a retiree's Social Security benefits.

Eye on Washington

Finally, both current and future retirees will want to monitor congressional actions over the next few years. That's because today's historically low marginal tax rates are scheduled to revert to higher levels in 2026, unless legislation is enacted (see table).

Help Is Available

Putting together a retirement-income strategy that strives to manage taxes is a complex task indeed. Investors may want to seek the help of a qualified tax or financial professional before making any final decisions.⁴

Tax Rates Scheduled to Rise

Unless legislation is enacted, federal marginal income tax rates are scheduled to rise in 2026.

Current rate	2026
10%	10%
12%	15%
22%	25%
24%	28%
32%	33%
35%	35%
37%	39.6%

1) Combined income is the sum of adjusted gross income, tax-exempt interest, and 50% of any Social Security benefits received.

2) Distributions from tax-deferred accounts and annuities prior to age 59½ are subject to a 10% penalty, unless an exception applies.

3) A qualified distribution from a Roth account is one that is made after the account has been held for at least five years and the account holder reaches age 59½, dies, or becomes disabled. A distribution from an HSA is qualified provided it is used to pay for covered medical expenses (see IRS publication 502). Nonqualified distributions will be subject to regular income taxes and penalties.

4) There is no guarantee that working with a financial professional will improve investment results.

As Your Parents Age, Help Them Protect Their Finances

It's heartbreaking to hear stories of people losing money (even their life savings) as a result of fraud or financial exploitation, especially if they are older and financially vulnerable. In fact, it's quite common. People age 70 and older reported losses of \$567 million in 2022.¹ You know your parents could be at risk, and you want to protect them, but how?

One place to start is by looking for warning signs that your parents have been victimized, or are at risk of being influenced, manipulated, or coerced by a stranger or someone they know.

- Unusual bank account activity, including large or unexplained withdrawals, and nonsufficient fund notices
- Missing checks, credit cards, or financial statements
- Unpaid bills
- Lost money or valuables that can't be located after a thorough search
- Relationships with people who seem to have undue influence
- Unexplained changes to legal documents
- Declining memory and decision-making skills

Regularly checking in with your parents may help you spot issues that need to be addressed. If your parents have fallen victim to a financial scam or are being pressured for money from someone they know, they may be embarrassed or reluctant to tell you, even if

you ask. Do your best to remain objective and nonjudgmental, and patiently listen to their views while expressing your own concern for their well-being.

Laying some groundwork to help prevent future incidents is also important. For example, talk to your parents about how they might handle common scams. Let them know it's a good idea to get a second opinion from you before acting on any request for information or money, even if it seems to come from their financial institution, a well-known company, law enforcement, a government agency such as the IRS or Social Security Administration, or even a grandchild in trouble.

Encourage them to set up appointments with their elder law attorney or financial professional to talk about concerns and legal and financial safeguards. They might also want to add layers of protection to their financial accounts, such as naming a trusted contact or setting up account alerts.

People are often reluctant to report financial fraud or exploitation, either out of embarrassment or fear of being wrong. But if you suspect your parents have been victimized, you can get help from many sources, including the National Elder Fraud Hotline, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice. You can call (833) 372-8311 to be connected with case managers who will assist you and direct you to additional resources.

1) Federal Trade Commission, 2022

IMPORTANT DISCLOSURES

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