Quick Guide to Navigating SSDI & SSI

Disability insurance may provide you with some income if you are unable to work because of your medical condition. Cancer is one of the top five types of conditions that qualify someone for disability insurance benefits, according to the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA). For more information about the different types of disability insurance, read our Quick Guide to Disability Insurance: TriageCancer.org/QuickGuide-DisabilityInsurance. This Quick Guide covers some key issues when navigating Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

1. **How do you decide whether to file for disability benefits or retire?**
If you are considering filing for Social Security disability benefits, but are also close to your Social Security early retirement age or full retirement age, you should consider checking your Social Security statement, to compare the amount of your monthly payments if you were to receive SSDI, retire early, or wait until you reach your full retirement age. This information can be found on your annual Social Security statement. You can access your statement any time by logging into your *MySocialSecurity* account online at ssa.gov/myaccount.

2. **What is the "Disability Onset Date?"**
Your disability onset date is the date that SSA determines your disability began. SSA reviews your medical records and your application to figure out the date that you were no longer able to work because of your medical condition.

3. **Can you get back payments, retroactive payments, or advance payments?**
The approval process for SSDI and SSI can take several months. To make up for the time it takes to approve an SSI or SSDI application, SSA makes back payments, which cover the time between the application date and the approval date. SSA also understands that people may not apply until after their disability began, so it also provides retroactive payments for SSDI. Retroactive payments cover up to 12 months from the date of application back to the disability onset date, after a 5-month waiting period. For information about when you receive SSDI benefits and Medicare, read our Quick Guide to the Timing of SSDI & Medicare Benefits: TriageCancer.org/QuickGuide-SSDITiming.

The SSA may presume that people with certain conditions, like cancer, have a disability. In those cases, you may receive SSI payments while your application is pending approval, for up to six months. If the SSA denies your application for SSI, you typically do not have to pay those advanced payments back.

4. **Do you have to pay taxes on Social Security disability benefits?**
Generally, SSI payments are not taxed. However, if you received SSDI, you may be responsible for paying taxes on benefits moving forward, as well as on any back payments or retroactive payments, depending on your overall household income level. For more information, visit: irs.gov/faqs/social-security-income/regular-disability-benefits.

5. **Can you receive SSDI and private long-term disability insurance?**
If you have a private long-term disability insurance policy (LTD), either that you bought directly from an insurance company or that you have access to through an employer, that LTD policy may also require you to apply for SSDI. Usually, the LTD policy will begin paying benefits without a waiting period and before the SSA decides if you are eligible for SSDI. If you are denied SSDI benefits, the LTD company may offer to help you with the appeals process, including hiring an attorney for you.

If you qualify for SSDI, then you may be eligible for back payments or retroactive payments. If a LTD policy has been paying benefits to you for the same months that SSDI makes back payments or retroactive payments, then the LTD policy will likely require you to repay them for those months. So it is important for you to wait to see what you might need to pay back to your LTD policy, before spending the back payments or retroactive payments from SSDI.

It is possible to receive benefits from both SSDI and a private LTD policy. However, the amount received from the private policy will be prorated. For example, if your LTD policy pays 80% of your salary and the amount that you receive from SSDI is only 60% of your salary, then moving forward, SSDI will pay 60% of your salary and the LTD policy will pay 20%.

6. **How often does SSA review your claim?**
Once you are approved for SSDI or SSI, the SSA will conduct a "continuing disability review" (CDR) of your medical condition periodically, to make sure that you are still unable to work due to your medical condition. The frequency of CDRs depends on your disability, and if:

- Improvement is "expected:" six to 18 months after your disability onset date
- Improvement is "possible, but can't be predicted:" every three years
- Improvement is "not expected:" every seven years.

If SSA decides you no longer qualify, you will be sent a termination notice. You can appeal the termination.

7. **What happens when you reach retirement age?**
For most SSDI beneficiaries born after 1960, full retirement age is 67. Once you turn 67, your benefits will switch from SSDI to Social Security retirement benefits. This switch is in name only and there should be no disruption in your monthly payments and the amount does not change.

8. **Do you have to report changes to SSA?**
If you are receiving SSDI or SSI, you are responsible for reporting any changes in your situation to SSA as soon as possible and no later than ten days after the end of the month in which the change occurred. The types of changes that should be reported to SSA include any changes in work status, household size, address, immigration status, income, marital status, or health status. Failing to report changes in a timely manner could result in: underpayment; overpayment (which must be paid back plus a penalty); or, the SSA could withhold payments for up to 12 months.

9. What are your options for health insurance?
In most states, if you are eligible for SSI, you are automatically eligible for Medicaid. Once you have received SSDI benefits for two years, you will then be eligible for Medicare. If you have a disability insurance policy through your employer, it is important to find out if your employer will continue to offer you health insurance while you are on disability, or if they will offer you coverage through COBRA or state-COBRA. If you need to purchase an individual health insurance policy, you can identify options through the State Health Insurance Marketplace. For information about health insurance options: TriageCancer.org/HealthInsurance or CancerFinances.org.

10. Are there programs to help you return to work?
Some people who receive SSDI or SSI have concerns about trying to return to work but being unable to work at the same capacity they could prior to a cancer diagnosis, and how that might affect their disability and health insurance benefits. Fortunately, SSA has programs to help you try to return to work, while protecting your access to disability benefits and the health insurance programs that are tied to those benefits. These programs are called "work incentives," and vary depending on whether you are receiving SSI or SSDI. The programs include a trial return to work period, vocational rehabilitation, and the Ticket to Work Program (https://choosework.ssa.gov/index.html). For information about work incentives: ssa.gov/disabilityresearch/workincentives.htm.

11. Can you apply for Social Security disability benefits and unemployment?
Generally, you cannot be eligible for both Social Security disability benefits and unemployment benefits. Every state's unemployment program requires individuals to certify that they are able to work and actively looking for work, while the SSA requires individuals to be unable to work because of a medical condition. However, there are limited exceptions when you may be able to receive both:

- If you are seeking some work, but the type of work is limited due to your disability and will pay you less than $1,770 per month (in 2027) you may be able to collect unemployment and SSDI
- If you are collecting unemployment, and then become disabled, you may be able to continue collecting unemployment while you apply for SSDI.
- If you receive SSDI, start working through the Ticket to Work program for at least six months, and are then laid off, you may be entitled to collect unemployment benefits while receiving SSDI.

For more information about navigating disability insurance, visit:
TriageCancer.org/DisabilityInsurance and CancerFinances.org.

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