

2026 Guide for Retirement Planning

FOLLOWING THESE PRACTICES CAN HELP LIBERATE YOU FROM UNCERTAINTY AND POSITION YOU TO ACCOMPLISH MORE THAN YOU THOUGHT POSSIBLE.



According to a national poll from Public First, more than half of Americans feel unconfident in their ability to retire when they want to and maintain a comfortable standard of living.¹ Based on our experience, this may even underestimate the issue, as just about everyone with whom we first meet — even those with considerable wealth — expresses concerns about not having enough assets to retire the way they would like.

To help you or anyone you know alleviate this mental burden and instead focus on maximizing what you can accomplish in retirement, here are some best practices that we help guide clients through:

01 | FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

It is important to recognize that both controllable and noncontrollable variables impact financial outcomes in retirement, and act accordingly.

Unfortunately, in our experience, people tend to disproportionately allocate their time to factors they can't control, when they should instead focus predominantly on the first — and to some degree, second — type of variables below:

Full Ability to Control

- Current lifestyle spending
- Savings
- Identifying retirement goals, including lifestyle spending and estimating their costs
- Asset allocation and location — investing optimally both in terms of assets (e.g., stocks, bonds, alternative investments) as well as the type of account in which they are held (i.e., taxable versus tax-deferred retirement accounts)

Some Ability to Control

- Duration of employment and earnings
- Longevity — lifestyle choices
- Surplus spending — expenses outside of lifestyle spending

Unable to Control

- Market returns and inflation
- Tax policy and other laws
- Healthcare costs

02 | MAXIMIZE RETIREMENT SAVINGS BEYOND YOUR 401(K)

Saving beyond 401(k)/403(b) plans is essential for most pre-retirees. In addition to maximizing your contributions to your workplace retirement account, you should:

- Maximize your after-tax assets by:
 - Maximizing contributions to after-tax accounts
 - Considering backdoor Roth IRA contributions (if allowable)
 - Considering a Roth IRA conversion
- Establish a spousal IRA, if relevant
- If self-employed, contribute to a Solo 401(k), SEP-IRA, or Defined Benefit Plan

Retirement Contribution Limits

Retirement Benefit Limits

	2026
Contribution Limits for 401(k)/403(b) Plans	\$24,500
Age 50–59 Catch-Up	\$8,000
Age 60–63 Catch-Up	\$11,250
Contribution Limits for SIMPLE IRA Plans	\$17,000
Age 50+ Catch-Up	\$4,000
Age 60–63 Catch-Up	\$5,250
Contribution Limits for IRAs	\$7,500
Age 50+ Catch-Up	\$1,100
Contribution Limits for Defined Benefit Plans	\$290,000
Contribution Limits for SEP IRA and Solo 401(k) Plan	\$72,000

Modified Adjusted Gross Income (MAGI) Limitations for IRA Contributions

	2026
Traditional IRA	
Single, Head of Household	\$81,000 – \$91,000
Married Filing Jointly	\$129,000 – \$149,000
Roth IRA	
Single, Head of Household	\$153,000 – \$168,000
Married Filing Jointly	\$242,000 – \$252,000
Married Filing Separately	0 – \$10,000
Roth Conversions	None

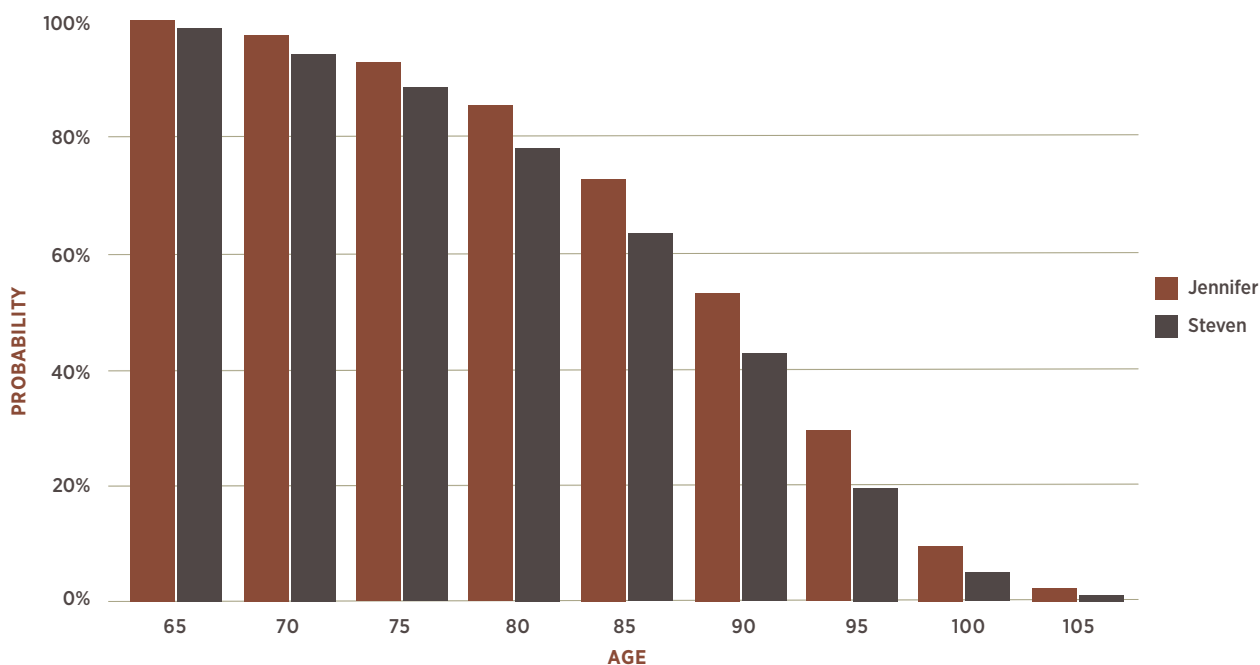
IMPORTANT NOTE: Workers aged 50 and older who earned over \$150,000 in FICA wages in the previous year (2025) must make all 401(k) catch-up contributions on a Roth (after-tax) basis.

Source: <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/401k-limit-increases-to-24500-for-2026-ira-limit-increases-to-7500>



03 | PLAN FOR A LONG RETIREMENT

The average life expectancy for a 65-year-old is 81.95 years of age.² But that is just an average. Based on data from the American Academy of Actuaries and the SOA Research Institute, there is a 54% chance the female partner of a couple aged 65 will live to age 90 and a 47% chance for the male partner if both are non-smokers in excellent health.³



This graph illustrates the likelihood that you and your spouse/partner will live to at least specific ages, starting at your retirement age. Jennifer and Steven are fictitious characters used for illustrative purposes and do not represent actual clients of Hightower.

This means you may need to plan for a 30-plus-year retirement, especially if warranted by family history, during which, as a general rule of thumb, you will likely need to replace about 75%-80% of your pre-retirement annual income. And this does not factor in certain discretionary purchases you may wish to make — for example, second homes or support for your children as they begin their adult lives (e.g., weddings, first car, and home purchases, etc.).

04 | IDENTIFY THE RIGHT RETIREMENT VEHICLE FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS

Evaluate your financial goals and marginal income tax bracket to decide whether to contribute to a traditional or Roth retirement account, or a combination of both.

The main reason you might decide to contribute to a Roth account instead of a traditional account is if you expect your taxable income to be higher in retirement than it is now. If that is the case, taking the tax hit now (rather than when you make withdrawals in retirement) while at a lower tax rate could make sense.

Another reason you may prefer a Roth account is if you expect to transfer your retirement assets to your heirs rather than spend them. In most cases, beneficiaries of Roth IRAs can make tax-free withdrawals during a 10-year period.

Traditional vs. Roth – Side-by-Side Comparison

	Traditional IRA	Traditional 401(k)/403(b)	Roth IRA	Roth 401(k)/403(b)
Tax Benefits	Tax deferred growth		Tax-free growth and tax-free qualified withdrawals	
Tax Deduction	Contributions may be tax-deductible depending on AGI	Yes, for current year contributions	No, funded with after-tax contributions	
Taxation of Withdrawals	Taxed as ordinary income		Qualified withdrawals are tax-free	
Early Withdrawal Penalties	With limited exceptions, withdrawals prior to age 59 1/2 result in a 10% penalty (and are treated as ordinary income)		Contributions can be withdrawn penalty-free prior to age 59 1/2; earnings are taxable and may be subject to 10% penalty	Earnings portion of a non-qualified distribution prior to age 59 1/2 is taxable and may be subject to a 10% penalty
Income Limits for Contributions	None, but deductibility is subject to income limits	None	Yes	None
Age Limits for Contributions	After 73	None	None	None
Eligibility to Contribute	Must have earned income	Actively employed	Must have earned income	Actively employed
Deadline to Contribute	April 15 of the following tax year	December 31	April 15 of the following tax year	December 31

Source: <https://smartasset.com/retirement/ira-contribution-deadline>

There may be other reasons for establishing or converting to a Roth IRA, including if you expect income taxes more generally to rise in future years. In any case, your financial advisor and accountant can help you determine if you are a good candidate.

05 | CONSIDER OTHER ROTH STRATEGIES

Roth accounts can be especially attractive to high earners. Investment growth and future withdrawals are tax-free after age 59 1/2, and minimum distributions aren't required at age 73 like they are with traditional retirement accounts.

However, current tax laws prohibit taxpayers with modified adjusted gross income of at least \$168,000 (\$252,000 if married, filing jointly) from contributing to a Roth IRA.⁴ But the following strategies can help those with income above those thresholds still take advantage of these vehicles:

Backdoor Roth Contributions

If your income is higher than the threshold for contributing to a Roth IRA, you can fund a traditional IRA with a non-deductible contribution. You may, in turn, convert this contribution into a Roth IRA tax-free, provided you do not have any other holdings in a traditional IRA. If you have an outstanding traditional, SEP, or SIMPLE IRA balance, the IRS will treat a portion of the conversion as taxable income.

example

Sarah is a single taxpayer, **age 55**, with a modified adjusted gross income of **\$450,000**, which prevents her from directly contributing to a Roth IRA.



Sarah currently has a 401(k) plan but **no traditional IRA.**



Sarah makes a **\$8,000** non-deductible contribution to a traditional IRA and **leaves the entire contribution in cash.**



Sarah **waits 30+ days** and then converts the non-deductible contribution **to a Roth IRA.**



Since Sarah had no traditional IRA holdings and only converted a non-deductible contribution (which had no earnings over the 30-day period), the conversion is not taxable.

Roth Conversions

Unlike income limits for Roth IRA contributions, there are no such income limitations for completing a Roth conversion. However, you should recognize that converting a traditional IRA to a Roth IRA typically produces taxable income, so you need to evaluate your income tax picture to compare how your current tax bracket might compare to a future tax bracket. Also, you may want to consider a partial conversion, so income attributable to the conversion does not move you into a higher tax bracket.

Also, if you expect to have a taxable estate, a Roth conversion may be beneficial as it reduces the size of your taxable estate by the amount of taxes paid on the conversion while eventually leaving a favorable asset to your heirs (i.e., inheriting a Roth IRA is generally preferable to inheriting a traditional IRA.)

	Maintain Pre-Tax IRA Balance/No Roth Conversion	Convert Pre-Tax IRA to Roth IRA
Income Tax on Roth Conversion	Not applicable	The amount of conversion creates taxable income, but you could potentially offset it with charitable gifts
Additional Contributions	If above AGI limits, deductible contributions to pre-tax balance disallowed; however, non-deductible contributions are allowed	If the entire pre-tax IRA balance is converted, creates opportunity for backdoor Roth IRA contributions without additional tax impacts
Required Minimum Distributions	In retirement, RMDs must be taken from the account, reducing the overall balance and adding tax liability	After Roth conversion, RMDs from the Roth IRA will not be required for the original account owner
Income Tax	Distributions are subject to income tax at ordinary income rates	Roth IRA distributions are not subject to income tax
Estate Tax	Account balance at death subject to estate tax	Account balance at death subject to estate tax
Post-Death Beneficiary Income Tax	RMDs to beneficiaries subject to income tax	RMDs to beneficiaries not subject to income tax

Source: Fiduciant Advisors, "2023 Financial Planning Guide: Assessing Your Financial Wellness."

Mega Backdoor Conversions

You can also check if your 401(k)/403(b) plan allows for "in-plan Roth conversions." Known as a "mega backdoor Roth," this strategy involves making after-tax contributions and subsequently converting those to a Roth account. However, note that time may be of the essence: This planning strategy has been targeted by lawmakers and could be addressed in future tax legislation.

06 | RELOCATE WISELY

If you're considering relocating to a different state during retirement, make sure you assess the all-in cost of living in the new location, qualitative factors that are important to you, and residency requirements — especially if you will split time between multiple residences. Below are some variables to consider:

- **Lifestyle:** Do you like the culture and climate? Can friends and family visit you affordably and with relative ease?
- **Access to health care:** Will you have day-to-day access to top-tier health care professionals and facilities in your new primary location?
- **Weather:** Understand the risk of natural disasters and the cost of insurance in your prospective new state.
- **All-in tax impact:** The reality is that no state is “tax-free.” Especially if your move is at least partly tax-motivated, be sure to evaluate the full spectrum of state taxes, including estate, property, and sales tax. Also, understand how other unique sources of income, such as deferred compensation, stock option income, and trust income, will be taxed at the state level. The rules vary, but it's possible that your current state — rather than destination state — will tax this income.

07 | DELAY COLLECTING SOCIAL SECURITY IF POSSIBLE

With the very real possibility that you could collect Social Security for 30 years or more, it's important to make a thoughtful, informed decision about when to begin benefits — even if Social Security isn't expected to be a primary income source in retirement.

While benefits can begin as early as age 62, your full retirement age (FRA) ranges from 65 to 67 depending on your birth year. Claiming before FRA results in a permanent reduction in monthly benefits, while delaying beyond FRA increases benefits by roughly 8% per year up to age 70. For many retirees, waiting as long as age 70 can significantly increase guaranteed lifetime income and provide greater protection against longevity risk.

In addition to boosting monthly benefits, delaying Social Security may also create tax-planning advantages. Higher benefits later in retirement can be paired with deductions available to older taxpayers, such as the new \$6,000 senior deduction for individuals age 65 and older, to help reduce overall taxable income. While this deduction does not change how Social Security benefits are taxed under federal law, lowering taxable income can reduce how much of those benefits are ultimately subject to federal income tax.

Taken together, delaying Social Security can help retirees maximize lifetime income, maintain flexibility in early retirement years, and potentially improve tax efficiency once benefits begin — particularly when coordinated with other income sources and available deductions.

Social Security Earnings Limit as of 2026

- Prior to FRA, you can earn income of up to \$24,480 before benefits are reduced.
- In the year of FRA, you can earn up to \$65,160 before benefits are reduced.
- After FRA, you are not subject to any earnings limit.

Consider taking benefits earlier if...

- You are no longer working and find it difficult to cover annual expenses.
- You are in poor health and do not expect the surviving member of the household to make it to average life expectancy.
- You are the lower-earning spouse, and your higher-earning spouse can wait to file for a higher benefit.

Consider taking benefits later if...

- You are still working and make enough to impact the taxability of your benefits.
- You are in good health and expect to exceed average life expectancy.
- You are the higher-earning spouse and want to be sure your surviving spouse receives the highest possible benefit.

Roth IRA income limits for 2025 and 2026. (2025, November 13). Fidelity. <https://www.fidelity.com/learning-center/smart-money/roth-ira-income-limits>

08 | PREPARE FOR MEDICARE AND ADDITIONAL HEALTHCARE EXPENSES

Well before you reach age 65, the age of eligibility to enroll in Medicare, you should begin to educate yourself on your options so that you can more accurately factor health care cost estimates into your retirement plan. This includes:

Understanding the different parts of Medicare. See below for a high-level summary:

A. Part A (Hospital Insurance)

- Free for people age 65 and older who paid payroll tax for 40+ quarters (about 10 years)
- Helps cover inpatient hospital care, skilled nursing facility care, hospice care, and home health care

B. Part B (Medical Insurance)

- Anyone eligible for Part A is eligible to enroll in Part B and pay a monthly premium
- Helps cover physician services, outpatient care, home health care, therapy services, ambulance services, preventive services, and durable medical equipment

C. Part C (Medicare Advantage)

- The private health insurance alternative to “Original Medicare” (i.e., Parts A and B), which might also include Part D coverage
- If enrolling in Medicare Advantage, you must still enroll in Parts A and B and pay the Part B premium; you also need to sign up and pay for the chosen Medicare Advantage plan

D. Part D (Prescription Drug Coverage)

- Run by private insurance companies that follow rules set by Medicare
- Helps cover the cost of prescription drugs
- Once total drug costs (between what you and the plan have spent) reach \$2,100 (2026 limit), you enter catastrophic coverage and no longer have to pay anything for covered prescriptions for the rest of the year⁵

Know When You Need to Sign Up for Medicare

DATE	NOTES
Initial Enrollment Period	Seven-month period; initial enrollment period begins three months prior to the month turning age 65 and ends three months after the month turning age 65 Individuals who do not sign up during the IEP may be subject to a late enrollment penalty
General Enrollment Period	January 1 - March 31 Those missing the Initial Enrollment Period can sign up during this period; coverage will subsequently start July 1
Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment	January 1 - March 31 (only for individuals who already have a MA plan) If enrolled in a Medicare Advantage plan, enrollee can: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Switch to a different Medicare Advantage plan ■ Drop Medicare Advantage plan and return to Original Medicare ■ Sign up for Medicare Part D (if returning to Original Medicare)
Annual Open Enrollment Period	October 15 - December 7 Individuals can join, switch or drop a plan for coverage beginning January 1
Special Enrollment Period	Individuals with certain qualifying life events (losing health coverage, moving, getting married, having a baby or adopting a child) may be eligible to sign up during a Special Enrollment Period
January 1	New coverage begins; monthly premium adjustments go into effect

Source: Fiducient Advisors, "2025 Financial Planning Guide: Investing in Your Financial Wellness."

Factoring in Out-of-Pocket Expenses

Part of knowing if you have saved enough for retirement is being able to estimate your health care expenses, which are inherently uncertain. However, there are variables to consider based on research:

- According to data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey (which informs Consumer Price Index [CPI] weighting), Medicare households spend significantly more on health care than non-Medicare households. Medicare households spent an average of \$7,000 on health care, accounting for 13.6% of their total household spending (\$51,800), while non-Medicare households spent \$4,900 on their health care, accounting for 6.5% of their total household spending (\$74,100).⁶
- About 80% of individuals ages 65+ will require some long-term care, with nearly 20% requiring high-intensity care for more than three years.⁷
- The average retired couple at age 65 can expect to spend around \$315,000 on health care expenses in retirement.⁸
- The annual cost of a semi-private room in a nursing home is \$118,104 and \$135,528 for a private room in 2026.⁹
- Nursing homes and long-term care drive high total out-of-pocket expenses, so aging adults should consider long-term care insurance. However, long-term care insurance premiums rise as you get older.

Taking Advantage of Triple-Tax HSA Savings

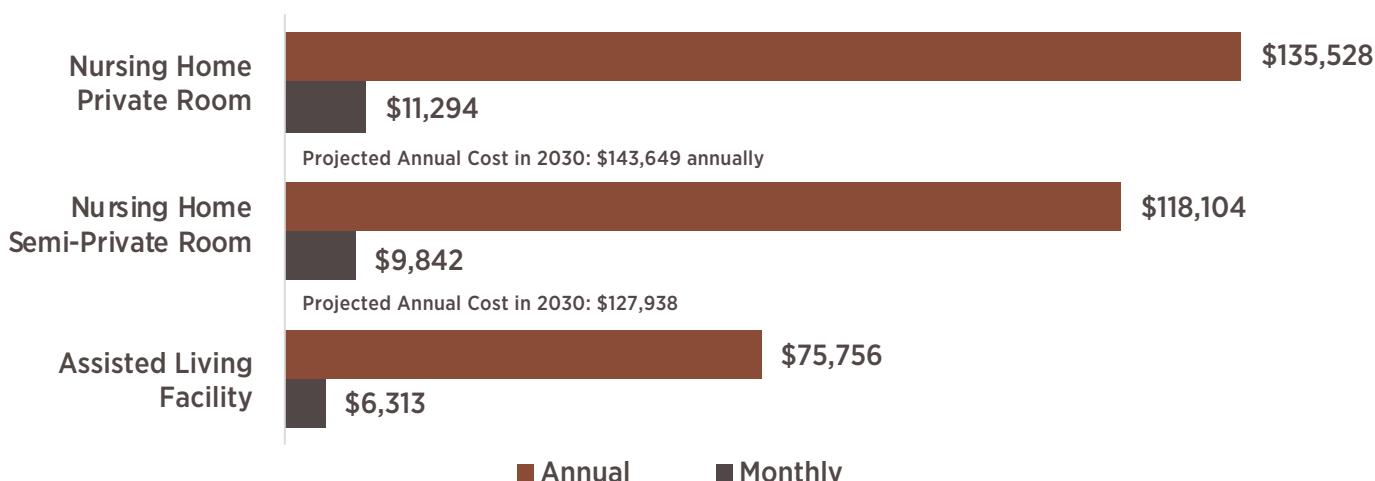
You can use a health savings account (HSA) not only to cover healthcare costs while you work but also as a tax-efficient savings vehicle to cover costs during your retirement. HSAs offer triple-tax savings: You contribute pre-tax dollars, pay no taxes on earnings, and pay no taxes when you make withdrawals for qualified medical expenses.

Unlike flexible spending accounts (FSAs), you can keep money you don't use in your HSA account from year to year. You can also invest it, and after age 65, use the money to pay for non-medical expenses without incurring penalties. However, if not used for qualified medical expenses, withdrawals are taxed at ordinary income rates, just as they would be from traditional IRAs or 401(k)s.

Long-Term Care Insurance Costs

With 10,000 baby boomers turning age 65 every day, costs of care are increasing to keep up with demand.

National Median Values



Source: Hoyt, J. (2026, January 11). Nursing home costs in 2026. SeniorLiving.org. <https://www.seniorliving.org/nursing-homes/costs/>

09 | REVIEW YOUR PLAN WITH YOUR ADVISOR AT LEAST ONCE A YEAR

As you encounter both expected and unexpected life changes, your retirement plan doesn't necessarily update automatically to reflect those changes. For this reason, meeting with your financial advisor at least once annually, not only for a regular update on your investments but also to perform a more holistic review of your financial plan, can help you avoid planning mistakes and uncover new opportunities to accomplish more with your savings.

10 | EVALUATE WEALTH TRANSFER AND ASSET PROTECTION STRATEGIES

Depending on the size and complexity of your assets — and what you'd like to accomplish with them — it may be prudent to consider advanced estate, tax, and asset-protection strategies well in advance of retirement. Estate and tax laws continue to evolve, and proactive planning can help preserve wealth, transfer assets efficiently, and provide greater flexibility regardless of future legislative changes.

Example of strategies to discuss with your advisor may include:

- Grantor retained annuity trusts
- Charitable remainder trusts and/or donor-advised funds
- Irrevocable life insurance trusts
- Qualified personal residence trusts
- Intrafamily loans
- And other planning techniques tailored to your goals and circumstances

Here is a checklist of common items that need regular review:

- Tax law changes
- Retirement goals
- Health condition and longevity expectations
- Current level of savings in light of retirement goals
- Portfolio asset allocation and asset location
- Estate planning documents
- If nearing retirement, your claiming age strategy for Social Security benefits
- Medicare options
- Beneficiary designations
- Medical directives
- Financial power of attorney
- Account titling

LEAN ON US

No two retirement plans should look the same. Our assets, life journeys, and goals are simply too unique to fit into a boilerplate framework. That is why working with a financial advisor who knows and appreciates you — while also benefiting from the experience of helping hundreds of other individuals and families — can pay dividends in retirement and beyond.

We look forward to hearing from you soon and helping you with one of the most rewarding experiences we have as advisors: empowering fulfilling retirements.



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ *New survey: Retirement expectations don't match reality | Bipartisan Policy Center. (2024, June 3). <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/new-survey-retirement-expectations-dont-match-reality/>*
- ² *Actuarial Life Table. (n.d.). Social Security. Retrieved March 5, 2025, from <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/STATS/table4c6.html>*
- ³ *American Academy of Actuaries and Society of Actuaries, Actuaries Longevity Illustrator, <http://www.longevityillustrator.org/>. Accessed February 27, 2025.*
- ⁴ *Roth IRA income limits for 2025 and 2026. (2025, November 13). Fidelity. <https://www.fidelity.com/learning-center/smart-money/roth-ira-income-limits>*
- ⁵ *How much does Medicare drug coverage cost? (n.d.). Medicare. Retrieved February 5, 2026, from <https://www.medicare.gov/health-drug-plans/part-d/basics/costs>*
- ⁶ *Ochieng, N., Cubanski, J., & Damico, A. (2024, March 14). Medicare households spend more on health care than other households | KFF. KFF. <https://www.kff.org/medicare/issue-brief/medicare-households-spend-more-on-health-care-than-other-households/>*
- ⁷ *Chen, A. (2025, February 15). How Do Retirees Cope with Uninsured Healthcare Costs? – Center for Retirement Research. Retrieved February 6, 2026, from <https://crr.bc.edu/how-do-retirees-cope-with-uninsured-healthcare-costs/>*
- ⁸ *Paul, T. (2023, July 30). Medical costs can eat up a sizeable portion of your retirement savings — here's how much you should expect to spend. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/select/how-much-expect-to-spend-on-medical-expenses-in-retirement/>*
- ⁹ *Hoyt, J. (2026, January 11). Nursing home costs in 2026. SeniorLiving.org. <https://www.seniorliving.org/nursing-homes/costs/>*



DISCLOSURES

6 Meridian is a group comprised of investment professionals registered with Hightower Advisors, LLC, an SEC registered investment adviser. Registration as an investment advisor does not imply a certain level of skill or training. Some investment professionals may also be registered with Hightower Securities, LLC, member FINRA and SIPC. Advisory services are offered through Hightower Advisors, LLC. Securities are offered through Hightower Securities, LLC. All information referenced herein is from sources believed to be reliable. 6 Meridian and Hightower Advisors, LLC have not independently verified the accuracy or completeness of the information contained in this document. 6 Meridian and Hightower Advisors, LLC or any of its affiliates make no representations or warranties, express or implied, as to the accuracy or completeness of the information or for statements or errors or omissions, or results obtained from the use of this information. 6 Meridian and Hightower Advisors, LLC or any of its affiliates assume no liability for any action made or taken in reliance on or relating in any way to the information. This document and the materials contained herein were created for informational purposes only; the opinions expressed are solely those of the author(s), and do not represent those of Hightower Advisors, LLC or any of its affiliates. 6 Meridian and Hightower Advisors, LLC or any of its affiliates do not provide tax or legal advice. This material was not intended or written to be used or presented to any entity as tax or legal advice. Clients are urged to consult their tax and/or legal advisor for related questions.