

Wyniecki Wealth News



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From Kurt: What is the Step-Up?






Estate Plans are complicated and inheritance subjects heirs to many different taxes. The "step-up in basis" rule allows those who plan to legally avoid certain taxes.

Taxable accounts do not defer federal taxes - they are funded with after-tax dollars and gains, *when recognized*, are subject to capital gains taxes. However, when an account owner passes, the gain (the difference between the Current Value of an investment and that investment's Purchase Cost) disappears. The Purchase Cost is "stepped-up" to the Current Value so no gain exists for the heir (and capital gains taxes can be completely avoided).

Mutual funds "recognize" gains every year, but gains on ETFs and individual stocks are recognized *only when that fund or stock is sold*. Accordingly, one can avoid capital gains by holding (and not selling) ETFs in individual accounts instead of mutual funds. It may take some planning, but avoiding these taxes can be worth it.

Then and Now

In 2003, the U.S. was emerging from the dot-com recession, unemployment rates were peaking during a jobless recovery, and online shopping was becoming more popular. Twenty years have passed, and here's how some things have changed — one pandemic and two recessions later.

	 Average mortgage rate (30-year fixed) ¹	 Unemployment rate ²	 E-commerce sales (percent of total retail) ³	 Personal saving rate (percent of disposable income) ⁴	 Average credit card interest rate ⁵
2003	6.32%	6.1%	1.7%	6.1%	12.89%
2023	7.18%	3.8%	15.4%	3.5%	22.16%

Sources: 1) Freddie Mac, 2023 (August); 2) U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023 (August); 3) U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 (Q2); 4) U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2023 (July); 5) Federal Reserve Board, 2023 (Q2)

Much Ado About RMDs

The SECURE 2.0 Act, passed in late 2022, included numerous provisions affecting retirement savings plans, including some that impact required minimum distributions (RMDs). Here is a summary of several important changes, as well as a quick primer on how to calculate RMDs.

What Are RMDs?

Retirement savings accounts are a great way to grow your nest egg while deferring taxes. However, Uncle Sam generally won't let you avoid taxes indefinitely. RMDs are amounts that the federal government requires you to withdraw annually from most retirement accounts after you reach a certain age. Currently, RMDs are required from traditional IRAs, SEP and SIMPLE IRAs, and work-based plans such as 401(k), 403(b), and 457(b) accounts.

If you're still working when you reach RMD age, you may be able to delay RMDs from your current employer's plan until after you retire (as long as you don't own more than 5% of the company); however, you must still take RMDs from other applicable accounts.

While you can always withdraw more than the required minimum, if you withdraw less, you'll be subject to a federal penalty.

Four Key Changes

1. Perhaps the most notable change resulting from the SECURE 2.0 Act is the age at which RMDs must begin. Prior to 2020, the RMD age was 70½. After passage of the first SECURE Act in 2019, the age rose to 72 for those reaching age 70½ after December 31, 2019. Beginning in 2023, SECURE 2.0 raised the age to 73 for those reaching age 72 after December 31, 2022, and, in 2033, to 75 for those who reach age 73 after December 31, 2032.

When Must RMDs Begin?

Date of Birth	RMD Age
Before July 1, 1949	70½
July 1, 1949, through 1950	72
1951 through 1959	73
1960 or later	75

2. A second important change is the penalty for taking less than the total RMD amount in any given year. Prior to passage of SECURE 2.0, the penalty was 50% of the difference between the amount that should have been distributed and the amount actually withdrawn. The tax is now 25% of the difference and may be

reduced further to 10% if the mistake is corrected in a timely manner (as defined by the IRS).

3. A primary benefit of Roth IRAs is that account owners (and typically their spouses) are not required to take RMDs from those accounts during their lifetimes, which can enhance estate-planning strategies. A provision in SECURE 2.0 brings work-based Roth accounts in line with Roth IRAs. Beginning in 2024, employer-sponsored Roth 401(k) accounts will no longer be subject to RMDs during the original account owner's lifetime. (Beneficiaries, however, must generally take RMDs after inheriting accounts.)

4. Similarly, a provision in SECURE 2.0 ensures that surviving spouses who are sole beneficiaries of a work-based account are treated the same as their IRA counterparts beginning in 2024. Specifically, surviving spouses who are sole beneficiaries and inherit a work-based account will be able to treat the account as their own. Spouses will then be able to use the favorable uniform lifetime table, rather than the single life table, to calculate RMDs. Spouses will also be able to delay taking distributions until they reach their RMD age or until the account owner would have reached RMD age.

How to Calculate RMDs

RMDs are calculated by dividing your account balance by a life expectancy factor specified in IRS tables (see IRS Publication 590-B). Generally, you would use the account balance as of the previous December 31 to determine the current year's RMD.

For example, say you reach age 73 in 2024 and have \$300,000 in a traditional IRA on December 31, 2023. Using the IRS's Uniform Lifetime Table, your RMD for 2024 would be \$11,321 ($\$300,000 \div 26.5$).

The IRS allows you to delay your first RMD until April 1 of the year following the year in which it is required. So in the above example, you would be able to delay the \$11,321 distribution until as late as April 1, 2025. However, you will not be allowed to delay your second RMD beyond December 31 of that same year — which means you would have to take two RMDs in 2025. This could have significant implications for your income tax obligation, so beware.

An RMD is calculated separately for each IRA you have; however, you can withdraw the total from any one or more IRAs. Similar rules apply to 403(b) accounts. With other work-based plans, an RMD is calculated for and paid from each plan separately.

For more information about RMDs, contact your tax or financial professional. There is no assurance that working with a financial professional will improve investment results.

Year-End 2023 Tax Tips

Here are some things to consider as you weigh potential tax moves before the end of the year.

Set Aside Time to Plan

Effective planning requires that you have a good understanding of your current tax situation, as well as a reasonable estimate of how your circumstances might change next year. There's a real opportunity for tax savings if you'll be paying taxes at a lower rate in one year than in the other. However, the window for most tax-saving moves closes on December 31, so don't procrastinate.

Defer Income to Next Year

Consider opportunities to defer income to 2024, particularly if you think you may be in a lower tax bracket then. For example, you may be able to defer a year-end bonus or delay the collection of business debts, rents, and payments for services in order to postpone payment of tax on the income until next year.

Accelerate Deductions

Look for opportunities to accelerate deductions into the current tax year. If you itemize deductions, making payments for deductible expenses such as qualifying interest, state taxes, and medical expenses before the end of the year (instead of paying them in early 2024) could make a difference on your 2023 return.

Make Deductible Charitable Contributions

If you itemize deductions on your federal income tax return, you can generally deduct charitable contributions, but the deduction is limited to 50% (currently increased to 60% for cash contributions to public charities), 30%, or 20% of your adjusted gross income, depending on the type of property you give and the type of organization to which you contribute. (Excess amounts can be carried over for up to five years.)

Increase Withholding

If it looks as though you're going to owe federal income tax for the year, consider increasing your withholding on Form W-4 for the remainder of the year to cover the shortfall. The biggest advantage in doing so is that withholding is considered as having been paid evenly throughout the year instead of when the dollars are actually taken from your paycheck.

Save More for Retirement

Deductible contributions to a traditional IRA and pre-tax contributions to an employer-sponsored retirement plan such as a 401(k) can help reduce your 2023 taxable income. If you haven't already contributed up to the maximum amount allowed, consider doing so. For 2023, you can contribute up to \$22,500 to a 401(k) plan (\$30,000 if you're age 50 or older) and up to \$6,500 to traditional and Roth IRAs combined (\$7,500 if you're age 50 or older). The window to make 2023 contributions to an employer plan generally closes at the end of the year, while you have until April 15, 2024, to make 2023 IRA contributions. (Roth contributions are not deductible, but qualified Roth distributions are not taxable.)

Take Any Required Distributions

If you are age 73 or older, you generally must take required minimum distributions (RMDs) from your traditional IRAs and employer-sponsored retirement plans (an exception may apply if you're still working for the employer sponsoring the plan). Take any distributions by the date required — the end of the year for most individuals. The penalty for failing to do so is substantial: 25% of any amount that you failed to distribute as required (10% if corrected in a timely manner). Beneficiaries are generally required to take annual distributions from inherited retirement accounts (and under certain circumstances, a distribution of the entire account 10 years after certain events, such as the death of the IRA owner or the beneficiary); there are special rules for spouses.

Weigh Year-End Investment Moves

Though you shouldn't let tax considerations drive your investment decisions, it's worth considering the tax implications of any year-end investment moves. For example, if you have realized net capital gains from selling securities at a profit, you might avoid being taxed on some or all of those gains by selling losing positions. Any losses above the amount of your gains can be used to offset up to \$3,000 of ordinary income (\$1,500 if your filing status is married filing separately) or carried forward to reduce your taxes in future years.

More to Consider

Here are some other things to consider as part of your year-end tax review.


Consider postponing income and/or accelerating deductions if

 You expect to be in a lower tax bracket next year (perhaps you'll retire next year)

 Your itemized deductions are greater than the standard deduction this year

 You want to delay payment of tax

Consider accelerating income and/or postponing deductions if

 You expect to be in a higher tax bracket next year (perhaps you have a lower income this year)

 The standard deduction is greater than your itemized deductions this year

 You're subject to alternative minimum tax this year and certain deductions are disallowed

Medical Debt and Your Credit Report

It's no surprise that consumers are contacted by debt collectors about medical bills more than any other type of debt.¹ After all, the complex world of medical billing and collection practices is extremely difficult to navigate. Many people have trouble understanding what the various billing codes on a medical bill even mean.

Historically, this has led to consumers racking up unpaid medical bills because they were unaware of what they owed or were in the process of disputing what they owed to their health care provider. These unpaid bills were then often reported to credit bureaus, negatively impacting credit reports.

Fortunately, there have been changes to the way medical debt is reported on credit reports. As of July 1, 2022, the three nationwide credit reporting companies (Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion) no longer include medical debt that was paid after it was sent to collections.

The credit reporting companies have also increased the amount of time before medical debt in collections appears on credit reports, extending it from six months to one year. This additional time is meant to give consumers the opportunity to settle any disputed charges or work out a payment plan with their health care providers.

Finally, as of April 11, 2023, the credit reporting companies no longer include medical debt in collections of less than \$500 on credit reports. It's estimated that with this last step, roughly half of those with medical debt on their credit reports will have it removed from their credit history.²

If you have unpaid medical bills, there are some steps you can take to make sure that they aren't negatively impacting your credit. First, check your credit report. You have the right to request one free copy of it every week from each of the three major consumer reporting companies at [AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com).

Once you obtain your credit report, make sure that any medical bill that is under \$500, less than a year old, or has been paid off no longer appears on your credit report. If you find a medical billing error (or any other error), you have the right to dispute it by contacting both the credit reporting company and the company that provided the erroneous information. You can also file a complaint with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau at [consumerfinance.gov](https://www.consumerfinance.gov).

1-2) Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, May 2023

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