
The Basics of Required Minimum Distributions

Ensuring that Uncle Sam Gets His Due

The benefits of retirement accounts such as a traditional IRA or a 401(k) are two-fold:

- Tax-deductible contributions allow individuals to reduce the size of their current tax burden while they are saving for retirement – which effectively lets them save more.
- Tax-deferred growth inside these accounts allows funds to accumulate without concern for an annual tax bill on that growth.

When It's Time to Pay Taxes

Eventually, however, the government must be paid. The tax benefits of these accounts are provided for one purpose: to help individuals save for retirement. Once an individual reaches retirement age, these same rules now dictate that the funds must be used for retirement purposes and the taxes that have been deferred must be paid.

What does this mean? It means that federal income tax law requires that a minimum amount of money, known as a “required minimum distribution,” or RMD, be withdrawn from these accounts each year, starting at a specific age, known as the “required beginning date” (generally age 72)¹. The amount to be distributed is determined by a special calculation that, in essence, takes the total amount in the account and divides it by the number of years the individual is expected to live. When the required minimum distribution amount is received, it is included as taxable income to the individual and Uncle Sam will, finally, get paid. If an account owner does not make distributions that are large enough, or if distributions are not made at all, a penalty tax of 50% of the amount that should have been distributed is generally due.²

But, one bit of good news is that the amount remaining in the account continues to grow tax deferred.

¹ The age 72 “trigger” date applies to distributions required to be made after December 31, 2019, to individuals who reach age 70½ after that date. Under prior law, age 70½ was the mandated age for beginning distributions.

² This is federal income tax law. State or local income tax law may differ.

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