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*A Registered Investment Advisor

Income Annuities Can Help Fill the Retirement Income Gap

If you're like many retirees, you may find that your sources of fixed retirement income, such as employer or military pensions and Social Security, aren't enough to meet all of your retirement income needs. To make up the difference, you can draw from your savings and investments, but how much can you safely withdraw without running out of money? One option is to create a stream of income for the rest of your life by investing some of your savings in an income annuity.

Income annuities (also known as immediate annuities) are purchased from insurance companies. In exchange for a lump sum of money, the issuer promises to make payments to you for a fixed period of time or for the rest of your life, or for the rest of your life and that of your spouse.

You can use almost any type of savings or investments to create a stream of income that can last for your lifetime. For example, you can purchase an income annuity with money from your personal savings accounts, matured CDs, or investments such as stocks, bonds, and mutual funds. You can even convert a portion of your retirement plan, such as an IRA or 401(k), to a lifetime stream of income by purchasing an income annuity within the retirement plan. However, some of these transactions may have income tax implications, so consult your tax advisor before you proceed.

You have options

You generally can choose how long your income annuity payments will last. For example, you can choose to receive payments for the rest of your life. This option allows you to supplement lifetime income from other sources, such as Social Security. However, payments end at your death, providing no benefits to your surviving spouse or heirs.

To ensure that your spouse continues to receive income after your death, you can select a joint and survivor payment option. The annuity will make payments to you, then at your death, to your surviving spouse until his or her death. Payments end at the death of the surviving spouse, with no benefits payable to your heirs.

You also can choose to receive income payments for a fixed period of time, such as 5 or 10 years, by setting up an income annuity. If you die during the payment period, your beneficiary will receive the remainder of the payments, either systematically or in a lump sum.

Another choice combines lifetime payments with the fixed period option. Payments are made for life or for a fixed period of time, whichever is longer. This alternative makes certain that payments will last for a minimum number of years.

Other factors to consider

- Payments from income annuities funded with pretax dollars, such as 401(k)s and IRAs, may be subject to income tax. Income annuities purchased with after-tax funds are taxed only on the earnings part of each payment. The remaining portion is considered a return of your investment and is not subject to taxation.
- Usually, once you select a payment option, you can't change it. This means you may not have access to any of the funds you used to purchase the income annuity aside from the income payments you receive.
- Since some payment choices, such as the life or the joint and survivor life options, end at death, it's possible you won't live long enough to receive at least the return of your investment in the income annuity.
- Fixed income annuity payments don't change, even if your income requirements do. You may find that the income from the annuity isn't enough to meet increased income needs.
- Choose a financially strong company. Annuity guarantees are entirely dependent on the insurance company's financial ability to meet its obligations. Check the financial ratings of the company offering the income annuity before making your purchase.

Is an income annuity right for you?

Consider an income annuity if you want a guaranteed income to fill the gap between your retirement income needs and your fixed retirement income. Also be sure you can buy the income annuity and still have enough savings for other expenses.

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