

Eligibility and process of naturalization in the U.S.

1. What is naturalization?

Naturalization is the conferral of U. S. citizenship after birth, to someone who does not hold U. S. citizenship. A person who is already a citizen of the United States cannot naturalize, so in some cases where a person not born in the U.S. might have a claim to citizenship via their parents, they must follow different processes to certify that citizenship, which are distinct from naturalization.

2. Who is eligible to apply for U.S. naturalization?

A: The precursor to naturalization is lawful permanent residence. That means that in order for a person to naturalize, they must first be a lawful permanent residence, as well as maintain that residency according to the requirements of the law, the most important of which, naturally, is physically and materially residing in the United States for a certain number of years before applying.

2. What are the residency requirements for naturalization?

A: The amount of years a person has to maintain residence in the United States before they are eligible to apply for naturalization is determined by how they received their lawful permanent residencia in the first place. In most cases, applicants must have been permanent residents for at least five years prior to applying for naturalization. However, applicants who obtained their residency via marriage to a United States Citizen, who remain married to their citizen spouse, may apply for naturalization after three years of residency. Permanent residents may travel outside of the United States without jeopardizing their eligibility to naturalize, however, this travel is generally limited to less than 6 months abroad per year, but the reason and duration of travel are analyzed holistically to determine that an individual meets their residency requirements.

3. How do I determine my eligibility for naturalization?

A: Complying with the physical presence requirements in the United States is only one of the requirements to naturalize. Applicants for naturalization must also demonstrate they are individuals of good moral character, which is analyzed in the context of the average citizen. Establishing good moral character includes of a review of many factors, which include a person's criminal record and their compliance with tax and child support obligations. Applicants must pass an English literacy test, which evaluates a minimum ability to read, write, speak and understand English, as well as some knowledge of United States history and basic functioning of government (some medical and age-related exemptions exist). Finally, applicants must demonstrate an attachment to the Constitution of the United States, also known as "attachment" to constitutional principles. This can disqualify applicants whose history links them to the Communist Party or other authoritarian regimes. Likewise, naturalization requires the applicant to have a favorable disposition toward the United States, which allows for a case-by-case evaluation.

4. What is the English language requirement for naturalization?

A: The general rule is that all applicants for naturalization must demonstrate a basic ability to read, speak, write and comprehend English. However, certain exceptions may apply, like in the case of medical exemptions, individuals past a certain age who have been permanent residents for a statutory number of years by the time they apply for naturalization (for example, applicants 50 years of age who have been permanent residents for 20 years).

5. How do I prepare for the civics test?

A: The civics test examines basic knowledge of United States history and government. The exam consists of 20 questions selected by the examination officer from a bank of 128 questions. The question bank is public, available online and many official as well as non-official study materials are easily found. The exam is oral and applicants must respond 12 out of the 20 questions posed correctly in order to pass. Applicants that qualify for age-related exceptions, may be eligible to take a simplified version of the civics test, from a much shorter question bank and slightly more general questions. Medical exemptions for the test typically refers to those individuals whose disability or impairment would impede them from preparing and responding to the exam.

6. Is there an age limit for applying for naturalization?

A: There is no age limit on applying for naturalization. An applicant may apply and naturalize at any age above 18 years old, provided they fulfill all eligibility requirements. As noted above, in some cases medical or age-related exemptions may apply for the examination portions of the naturalization process.

7. Can I apply for naturalization if I have a criminal record?

A: Criminal record may impact ineligibility for naturalization. Typically, the USCIS considers good moral character during the 5-year period immediately preceding an application to naturalize. In some cases, applicants may be advised to wait to apply for naturalization, so as to “reset” the five-year period and allow for the building up of a clean record. Though all criminal records must be disclosed regardless of when they occurred, a clean record during the 5 year statutory period is certainly advisable. However, there are certain convictions that constitute a bar to naturalization regardless of when they occurred, such as convictions for murder or for an aggravated felony if the conviction was issued on or after November 29, 1990. Some examples of aggravated felonies include rape, sexual abuse of children, child pornography, drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, and fraud in a certain amount. Helping a foreign national illegally enter the U.S. is an aggravated felony, unless the foreign national was a spouse, parent, or child of the defendant, and they had no previous record of smuggling foreign nationals into the U.S.

8. How long does the naturalization process take?

A: Form N-400 is submitted to the USCIS Field Office that serves the applicant’s place of residence. Depending on which Field Office an application is submitted to, processing times

may vary. The USCIS website includes a section to confirm processing times at each Field Office, however, as of January 2026, 80% of applications are completed within 6 to 10 months on average.

9. What is the Oath of Allegiance, and when is it taken?

A: After applicants pass the naturalization interview, they attend a naturalization ceremony where the oath of allegiance is administered. It is the final step in the naturalization process. The Oath of Allegiance to the United States is a sworn declaration that every citizenship applicant must recite during a formal ceremony in order to become a naturalized American citizen. The Oath ceremony is a tradition dating back to the 18th century. When taking the Oath, the new citizen promises to fulfill the following duties: support and defend the U.S. Constitution and the laws of the United States against its enemies, give up allegiance to any other nation or sovereign, and renounce hereditary or noble titles, if any and provide military or civilian service when called upon by the government to do so. Attending the Oath of Allegiance ceremony is mandatory as the final step of the naturalization process.

10. What benefits do I get after becoming a U.S. citizen?

A: Rights of United States citizens include voting in any U.S. election and running for elected office (U.S. citizenship is required for federal office and for most positions in public office at the state and local levels), obtaining federal benefits available only to U.S. citizens, such as federal college assistance available only to U.S. citizens; their children automatically become United States citizens even if abroad; applying for jobs with the U.S. government (Most federal employment is reserved only for U.S. citizens);. Applying for a U.S. passport which with an individual can travel to more than 180 destinations for short-term trips without a visa, taking as many trips abroad as they want for as long as they want, and seeking assistance from the local U.S. embassy during times of trouble. In addition, naturalized United States citizens cannot be deported to their country of former citizenship or nationality.

11. How much does it cost to apply for naturalization?

A: As of January 2026, the filing fee for Form N-400 is \$760. Generally speaking, a biometric services fee of \$85 is also required for applicants under 75. For certain applicants, there may be no fee required under section 328 or 329 of the INA.

12. Is the naturalization test conducted in my native language?

A: Applicants will need to pass both English and civic test. The English test may be exempt, even civic test may be simplified, in the language of choice if applicant meets the requirements for age, periods totaling as a permanent resident, or certain medical / disability conditions.

13. Can I lose my U.S. citizenship after naturalization?

A: In rare cases, U.S. citizenship obtained through naturalization can be revoked if it is later discovered that the individual procured naturalization illegally, willfully misrepresented on

material facts, or if citizenship was obtained based on honorable service in the U.S. armed forces but discharged other than honorable before serving for at least five years.

14. Can I travel outside the U.S. while my naturalization application is pending?

A: There's nothing to prohibit from traveling. However, it's generally advised to consult with an immigration attorney to assess potential risks. Typically, applicants should consider the risk of missing a biometric appointment or interview and interrupting continuous residence.

15. Can I include my children in my naturalization application?

A: Some children may automatically acquire citizenship when the parent obtained it. Others who are permanent residents and meet certain requirements may be eligible to derive U.S. citizenship from their parents. Depending on the age and marital status of the children, they may have to submit their own application. Consult with an immigration attorney for specific guidance.

16. Do I need to renew my green card after becoming a U.S. citizen?

A: No, once you become a U.S. citizen, you no longer need to renew your green card. Instead, you can apply for a U.S. passport. Your green card will be returned to USCIS when you check in for your citizenship oath ceremony because you will no longer need it, and you will get your Certificate of Naturalization at the ceremony.

17. Can I change my name during the naturalization process?

A: Yes, you can request a name change as part of the naturalization process. At the time of the interview, the USCIS officer will record the name change request and have you sign a name change petition. The new name will be reflected on your Certificate of Naturalization.

18. Can I apply for naturalization if I owe taxes?

A: Yes, you can apply for naturalization even if you owe taxes. However, it is very important to consult with an experienced immigration attorney if you have any outstanding tax with IRS, state or local because this can trigger Good Moral Character concern which may result in a denial of your application.

19. Can I apply for a fee waiver for the naturalization application?

A: Yes, fee waivers are available for those who meet specific criteria. You can request a fee waiver with the proper form and a written request establishing your inability to pay based on the grounds including the current receipt of means-tested benefic, household income is below certain number according to the Federal Poverty Guidelines, or current financial hardship. You may also qualify for a reduced fee if you don't qualify for a fee waiver.

20. What happens if my naturalization application is denied?

A: Depending on the ground of denial, you may remain to be a Lawful Permanent Resident (green card holder), or you may face green card cancellation and deportation. You may have the option to appeal the decision by requesting a hearing, or, in some cases, reapply.

Consult with an attorney to explore your options based on the specific reasons for the denial. More importantly, it is crucial to consult with an experienced immigration attorney team with comprehensive knowledge in immigration practice, especially when you have certain criminal records, failed to provide child care or support, have outstanding taxes, not registered in Selective Service or if you have any other concerns.

21. Can individuals replace a lost or damaged Certificate of Citizenship?

A: Yes, individuals can submit Form N-565 application with USCIS to request a replacement. The application must be submitted with the appropriate fee and in accordance with the form instructions.