Smart Retirement Ideas for Women of All Ages

What's the best time to start retirement planning? If you take the question at face value, the answer would probably be "the day before you were born—if not earlier."

That, of course, isn't realistic, but it illustrates a key concept: the most important asset isn't money—it's time. But even if you're a lot closer to retirement than someone fresh out of college, it's never too late to start. Some simple principles can move you toward your goals at any age.

Fight the "I Can't Save Syndrome"
Perhaps the biggest financial trap is the frustrating feeling that you can't save. But it's misleading. You might not be able to save what feels like a lot now, but you *can* save something.

If you keep waiting until you feel like you're "making enough," you might wait a long time. Earnings may increase with time, but so do expenses. If you get discouraged, give up, and save nothing, month after month, year after year, you'll remain discouraged—*and* broke.

Instead, choose an amount, no matter how small, that you can contribute regularly to a company retirement plan, personal investments or a savings account. Do what works for *you,* now, and be consistent. Don't get caught up comparing yourself to others. If you feel you can't afford the proverbial 10 percent of take-home, try 5 percent. Still a stretch? Try 1 or 2 percent. It's a start.

By doing so, you'll learn that you *can* save consistently and start to feel more confident. Slow and steady saving will grow before you know it into something not so small.

Tips for the 20s
If you're currently in your 20s and just beginning your work life, do everything you can to start saving now for retirement. Maybe you're in an entry-level job and paying off student loans. Perhaps you feel like you're not making a lot of money and can't afford to save much.

But remember: time is on your side. With the opportunity to accumulate returns over 30, 40, or more years, contributions that start small can grow into a substantial nest egg.

Tips for the 30s
In the 30s, women's career and life paths can vary widely. Maybe you've focused steadily on your career and have moved into middle management. Or maybe you've left the workforce for a period of time to focus on children. Or perhaps your kids are at an age when you're thinking about returning to work.

The most important thing to realize is that, in any situation, you *can* remain proactive.

- **If you're working full time,** be sure to participate as fully as possible in your employer retirement plan. Know how your money is invested, your options, and the expenses. If you feel the plan isn't meeting your needs, tell your employer, who may be open to a change.

If you are unaware of the retirement options offered by your employer, ask questions and investigate. If a retirement plan is offered, remember to participate as fully as possible.

- **If you're not working,** keep an eye on retirement accounts you started when you were. For instance, as stock, bond, and real estate markets rise and fall, you may need to rebalance your portfolio. A financial advisor can help with this.
- **If you plan to re-enter the workforce,** stay in touch with colleagues. Keep your knowledge and skills sharp through volunteer or freelance work. Follow professional publications. This can smooth your path when you're ready to go back.
- **If you're working part-time or casually,** you may be able to contribute to retirement accounts from past employers. Also consider non-employer options like Roth IRAs.

Tips for the 40s
Whether you've been working steadily since you were a twentysomething, or are in the midst of re-starting your career, realize that as you enter your 40s you're also probably entering your peak earning and career development years.

Now, especially, is the time to make sure you're working to the best of your abilities and desires to maximize earning power and investment opportunities. Are your 401K contributions already maxing out the employer match? Find out if you can make additional contributions and, if so, what limits and tax impacts apply.

Also consider talking to a professional financial advisor. In addition to evaluating an employer-based plan, she should also be able to assess your entire personal or family financial picture from a retirement perspective.

As you go through your 40s and into your 50s, you may also need to start gradually reducing risk. For example, some experts recommend a simple formula of "100 minus your age" for the percentage to keep in riskier investments like stocks. But a financial advisor may be able to help you develop a strategy tailored more specifically to your needs.

What if I Got a Late Start?
Maybe you're past your 40s now and your saving habits have been less than ideal. Or maybe you've had setbacks beyond your control. If so, understand first that you have plenty of company.

Focus on the bright side. Now, you may have the benefit of more work experience. And you definitely have more life experience, and better skill in disciplined, focused effort. All that can go a long way toward regaining lost ground.

Even if you're fairly close to retirement age and don't have a solid portfolio, it's never too late to start. Make a plan, and follow it with discipline for the rest of your working years. You might need to work a few years longer, or make some lifestyle sacrifices to save more aggressively. But with a plan, you're likely to land in a much better place.

In this situation, a financial advisor could be crucial. Do you have enough growth investments to meet your goals, balanced with conservative elements to protect capital? Do you have assets that will continue to appreciate even after you retire? Professional insights could be a big help.

So the basic message is the same at any age. Make a plan, stick with it and, most of all, don't delay—start now. Whether you're a latte-loving twentysomething or qualified for a senior coffee discount, your result should be much better with a plan than without one.