



How Does Social Security Evaluate Disability Claims?

Written On January 11, 2010 By [Bob Kraft](#)

There is a five-step process set out in the Code of Federal Regulations that determines how disability claims are to be evaluated. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520 and 416.920 (2009). If an individual is found disabled or not disabled at any point in this five-step process, the analysis stops and is conclusive on the issue of disability. The basic five steps are outlined below:

- Step One. At the first step, Social Security determines whether you are currently engaged in substantial gainful activity. This is generally determined by looking at the amount of wages (if any) that you earn on a monthly basis. If your wages are high enough, you will be found not disabled regardless of the severity of your medical condition, your age, your education, or past work experience.
- Step Two. If you get past step one of the analysis, Social Security then ensures that you have a severe impairment or combination of impairments. If the impairment(s) are not severe, you are deemed not disabled.
- Step Three. If you get past step two, Social Security compares your severe impairment(s) with those on a list of specific impairments. If your impairment(s) meets (or equals in severity) the criteria of a listed impairment, you are deemed disabled without considering your age, education, or work experience. Not every impairment or diagnosis is included among the listed impairments, referred to as “The Listings.”
- Step Four. If your claim proceeds past step three – because your impairment is either not on the list or does not satisfy the listing – Social Security will determine if your residual functional capacity (RFC)

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allows you to perform the demands of your past work. If you are still able to do your past work, you are deemed not disabled.

· Step Five. If you cannot perform your past work as determined in step four, Social Security then determines at the fifth and final step if you can, given your residual capacities, age, education, and work experience, do other work. If you cannot do other work, you will be found disabled.

You have the burden of proof at the first four steps of the above analysis. If you have shown that you are unable to perform your previous work, the burden shifts to Social Security to show that there is other substantial gainful employment available that you, taking into account all of your limitations, are able to do and maintain for a significant period of time. If Social Security adequately points to potential alternative employment, the burden shifts back to the claimant to prove that he or she is unable to perform the alternative work.