



Becoming a U.S. Citizen

What do I get as a citizen?

Here are some things to know if you are thinking about becoming a U.S. citizen. When you become a U.S. citizen you get these things:

- The right to vote.
- You can leave and re-enter the country more easily.
- You can usually help family members come to live in the U.S. more quickly.
- Your children under 18 often become U.S. citizens automatically.
- You can't be deported. Non-citizens who commit crimes can be deported in many cases.
- You can apply for jobs in the federal government.
- Better rights with some welfare programs like MFIP and SSI.
- You can get a U.S. passport.
- You can often get better customer service when visiting U.S. embassies.

Do I give anything up to be a citizen?

You promise to give up loyalty to your native country. This can change your rights in that country. Each country has its own rules. Check with your native country about its rules. In your native country you may lose:

- Your citizenship
- The right to vote
- The right to own property there

These things may change:

- Your custody rights to your children
- Your right to enter your native country
- You may need a permit to work in your native country after you are a U.S. citizen.



Who can be a U.S. citizen?

You must:

- Be at least 18 years old if filing on your own.
- Have had your permanent resident card for 5 years. It is only **3** years if you are married to and have lived with a person who has been a U.S. citizen for at least 3 years or if you were approved for VAWA based on a marriage to a U.S. citizen (I-360 self-petition).
- Live in the same state for more than 3 months.
- Have good moral character.
- Swear loyalty to the U.S.
- Read, write and speak English and know some U.S. history and government. You may be able to skip the English or history tests – see below.

Will my children be citizens?

Children under 18 can become U.S. citizens automatically when a parent becomes a citizen if:

- 1 of the parents becomes a citizen before the child turns 18, **AND**
- The child has a permanent resident card, **AND**
- The child is in the custody of the citizen parent (even for a short period), **AND**
- The child is not married when the parent becomes a citizen.

If you have the right proof of these things, the child can get a certificate of citizenship or a U.S. passport. See our fact sheet [Proving Your Child's Citizenship](#).

How do I get ready for the test?

Even if you do not know English, do not give up. Take citizenship and English classes. Many classes are free. To find citizenship and English classes near you, call The Minnesota Literacy Council at 1-(800) 222-1990. Or go online to <http://mnliteracy.org/>.

Do I have to learn English?

You do not have to know English if you:

- Are 55 or older and have had your permanent resident card for 15 years, or
- Are 50 years or older and have had your permanent resident card for 20 years.



You will still have to pass the U.S. history and government test, but you can do it in your own language.

If you are 65 years old and have had your permanent resident card for at least 20 years, you can take an easier history and government test, and you can do the citizenship interview in your own language.

What if I can't learn English?

If you cannot learn English, history or government because you have a medical condition, you can ask for a "waiver." "Waiver" means that you do not have to do the interview in English and you do not have to take the history and civics test.

Have your doctor, psychologist, or osteopathic doctor fill out [USCIS Form N-648](#). Call 1-(800) 870-3676 for a form. You can also get it online at www.uscis.gov. Type N-648 in the search bar.

Ask your doctor before you give them the form if your insurance will pay for this. Ask the doctor to say in detail what your medical condition is and how it keeps you from learning.

Does it cost money to apply for citizenship?

Yes. The fee is \$725. If you can't pay the fee, talk to a lawyer or paralegal. If you get federal benefits like MFIP or SSI, or if you have a low income or financial hardship you may be able to ask Immigration to file for free or pay a lower fee. See our Fact Sheet, [Immigration Fee Waivers](#).

In August 2020, the USCIS made a new rule that significantly changes most fees and ends most fee waivers. The rule was stopped from going into effect in September but could start up at any time. Check <https://www.uscis.gov/> for more information.

Should I talk to a lawyer before I apply?

In some cases, you should. The lawyer can give advice about whether to apply and how to fill out the papers. Talk to a lawyer if you:

- Have lived outside the U.S. for more than 6 months since you came to the U.S.
- Had alcohol or drug problems, including Khat or illegal drugs.
- Were arrested or charged with a crime. (You could be deported.)
- Were charged or convicted for domestic abuse or someone had an Order for Protection against you.
- Failed to pay child support.
- Did not file income tax returns or owe taxes.
- Were married when you entered the U.S., but you applied to come here as an "unmarried refugee child".
- Have not been truthful with Immigration in the past.
- Are a man who didn't register for the military draft as a young man or who was in the army and deserted.
- Were in the Communist Party.
- Were in any racist or hate group, or a group that wanted to overthrow the U.S. government.
- Have any questions about any changes in your life which may affect your immigration status.
- Want to change your name as part of the citizenship process.

Tell the truth in your application and at your interview. One shoplifting offense 10 years ago may not keep you from being a citizen, but lying about it could.

For help call:

Legal Aid's Immigration Law Project at (612) 332-1441
The Immigrant Law Center at 1 (800) 223-1368
SMRLS Refugee, Immigrant and Migrant Services at (651) 291-2837



Fact Sheets are legal information NOT legal advice. See a lawyer for advice.

Don't use this fact sheet if it is more than 1 year old. Ask us for updates, a fact sheet list, or alternate formats.

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