If you are asking “how can I get an American citizenship,” the main path for most adults is **naturalization** after you have been a lawful permanent resident (green card holder) for a required period and meet all other statutory requirements. Becoming a citizen involves several steps—confirming eligibility, filing Form N-400, attending biometrics and an interview, passing English and civics tests, and finally taking the Oath of Allegiance.

This guide walks through **how to get citizenship in the US**, including the **requirements of citizenship in the USA**, when you can apply, and how long the process typically takes, with links to additional Lunel Law resources on green cards and family-based immigration.

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Understanding American Citizenship

Under U.S. law, you can become a citizen **by birth**, **by derivation through a parent**, or **through naturalization** after meeting specific eligibility rules. People born in the United States (with limited exceptions) are U.S. citizens at birth, and some individuals born abroad to U.S. citizen parents also acquire citizenship automatically if statutory conditions are met.

Those not born citizens usually ask “how can you become a US citizen later in life,” and the answer is typically the

naturalization process, which confers full citizenship rights and responsibilities equivalent to those of citizens by birth. For a deeper comparison of naturalized citizens and citizens by birth, see Lunel Law's guide on naturalized citizens vs. birthright citizens.

What is Naturalization?

If you are wondering **"what is naturalization?"**, it is the legal process by which a non-U.S. citizen voluntarily becomes a U.S. citizen **after birth** by meeting eligibility requirements and completing a formal application and interview process. USCIS describes naturalization as granting U.S. citizenship to a lawful permanent resident who satisfies statutory criteria in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).

The **naturalization process** usually requires a period of lawful permanent residence (generally 5 years, or 3 years for some spouses of U.S. citizens), continuous residence and physical presence, good moral character, and passing English and civics tests. Once naturalization is approved and you take the Oath of Allegiance, you receive a Certificate of Naturalization and become a U.S. citizen.

Difference between Citizenship and Permanent Residency

Many people first obtain a **green card** and then ask, “how long for citizenship after green card?”—but it is important to understand how permanent residency differs from citizenship.

Green Card (Permanent Resident) vs. U.S. Citizen

Aspect	**Lawful Permanent Resident (Green Card Holder)**	**U.S. Citizen**
Immigration status	May live and work permanently in the U.S., but can lose status in some circumstances	Status is generally permanent; far stronger protection from removal
Travel	Can travel abroad but extended trips may disrupt continuous residence or lead to abandonment of status	Can travel freely; may obtain a U.S. passport and re-enter as of right
Voting	Cannot vote in federal elections	Can vote in federal, state, and local elections (subject to state rules)

Aspect	Lawful Permanent Resident (Green Card Holder)	U.S. Citizen
Public office and federal jobs	Limited eligibility for some positions	Eligible for most federal jobs and many public offices
Family immigration	Can sponsor certain relatives, but with more limits and longer waits	Can sponsor a broader range of family members, often with shorter queues
Path to citizenship	May qualify to apply for **naturalization citizenship** after meeting residency and other requirements	Already a citizen; no need for naturalization

Holding a green card is often the essential first step in moving from **green card to citizenship**, especially for those using **family-based immigration** paths.

Eligibility for Citizenship

When clients ask **“how can I get an American citizenship?”**, the starting point is whether they meet the **American naturalization requirements** in the INA and USCIS regulations. For most applicants filing based on a standard case (the “5-year rule”), general **naturalization requirements** include:

- Being **at least 18 years old** at the time you file Form N-400.
- Being a **lawful permanent resident (green card holder)** for at least **5 years** (or 3 years if qualifying through a U.S. citizen spouse).
- Meeting **continuous residence** and **physical presence** requirements.
- Showing **good moral character** during the relevant period.
- Demonstrating attachment to the **U.S. Constitution and laws**.
- Passing **English** (reading, writing, speaking) and **civics** tests, unless an age- and residency-based exemption applies.

USCIS's **"Guide to Naturalization"** and instructions to Form N-400 outline these **U.S. nationality requirements** in detail.

Requirements of Citizenship in the USA

The more detailed **requirements of citizenship in USA** law depend on how you are qualifying (5-year rule, 3-year marriage rule, military service, or certain exceptions). For the typical 5-year lawful permanent resident, USCIS lists requirements such as:

- **Five years as a permanent resident** immediately before filing Form N-400.

- **Continuous residence** in the U.S. over those 5 years, meaning you did not take long trips that break residence.
- **Physical presence** in the U.S. for at least **30 months** out of those 5 years.
- **Residence for at least 3 months** in the state or USCIS district where you file.
- Filing and paying **taxes** as required and complying with U.S. law, which affect good moral character.[lunellaw]

Lunel Law's naturalization eligibility guide explains these **naturalization requirements** in accessible, client-focused language.[lunellaw]

When can I apply for citizenship?

If you ask **"when can I apply for citizenship?"** or **"after getting green card when I can apply for citizenship?"**, the answer usually depends on the **5-year rule** or **3-year rule**.

- **5-year rule (most applicants):** You can generally file Form N-400 after **5 years** as a permanent resident, with the option to file up to **90 days early** before the 5-year anniversary if all other conditions are met.
- **3-year rule (marriage to a U.S. citizen):** Some applicants married to and living with a U.S. citizen can file after **3 years** as a permanent resident, again with a 90-day early filing window, if they meet all marriage-based requirements.

USCIS explains these timing rules and early filing options in the N-400 instructions and related guidance.[reginfo]

Age and Residency Requirements

To meet the **age and residency requirements**, a typical applicant must:

- Be **at least 18 years old** at the time of filing (with certain exceptions for military service).[reginfo]
- Have maintained **continuous residence** in the United States as a green card holder for **5 years** (or 3 years under the marriage rule).
- Have been **physically present** in the U.S. for at least **30 months of the 5 years** (or **18 months of the 3 years** for eligible spouses).

Extended trips abroad—especially those of 6 months or more—can disrupt continuous residence and affect **when a green card holder can apply for citizenship**, so it is important to plan international travel carefully in the years before you apply.

The Naturalization Process

If you are asking **“how do you become a citizen of the United States?”**, USCIS and Lunel Law describe a fairly standard **naturalization process**:

1. **Confirm eligibility** under the 5-year, 3-year, military, or other special rules.
2. **Prepare and file Form N-400, Application for Naturalization**, with the required fee and supporting evidence.
3. Attend a **biometrics appointment** for fingerprints and background checks.
4. Complete the **naturalization interview**, where a USCIS officer reviews your application and administers **English and civics tests** (unless you qualify for an exemption).
5. If approved, attend a **naturalization ceremony** and take the **Oath of Allegiance**, at which point you become a citizen and receive a Certificate of Naturalization.[lunellaw]

Lunel Law’s naturalization page outlines these steps and notes that USCIS must generally issue a decision within **120 days after you pass your civics test**, giving some applicants the option to pursue a mandamus action if a case is unreasonably delayed.[lunellaw]

Green Card to Citizenship

Many readers are on a **family-based green card** and want to know **how to obtain citizenship in US** status from there. Family-based green cards—such as immediate relative visas and categories like the IR6 green card for spouses of U.S. citizens—often lead to naturalization eligibility under the 3-year or 5-year rules.

For example, a spouse with a 10-year IR6 green card may be eligible to apply for citizenship **3 years after becoming a permanent resident** if still married to and living with the U.S. citizen spouse. For broader **family-based immigration** routes that lead to a green card (and eventually naturalization), see Lunel Law's overview of family-based immigration.

How to Apply for Citizenship in the US

If you want a step-by-step answer to **"how do you apply for citizenship in the United States?"** or **"how can you become a US citizen?"**, the practical roadmap usually looks like this:

- Confirm you meet **eligibility**, including time as a permanent resident and good moral character.
- Create a **USCIS online account** (if filing online) or download the current **Form N-400** and instructions.
- Complete the form accurately, disclosing all prior immigration history, arrests, and trips abroad.
- **File the application for naturalization** with the required fee and copies of supporting documents.

- Monitor your **USCIS case status**, attend biometrics, prepare for your interview and tests, and respond promptly to any Requests for Evidence.

This is the core path for those searching online for “how to become a American citizen” or “how to get citizenship in US,” regardless of where in the United States they live.

Preparing for the Application

Good preparation can make your **application for naturalization** smoother and may help avoid delays. Before you file, consider:

- Reviewing USCIS’s **Guide to Naturalization** and Lunel Law’s naturalization guidance to verify that you satisfy all **naturalization requirements**.
- Making a detailed list of your **addresses, employment, and trips abroad** for the last 3–5 years, which Form N-400 requires.[reginfo]
- Checking whether any **criminal history, tax issues, or long absences** could affect good moral character or continuous residence, and seeking legal advice if needed.

As Lunel Law notes, many applications are now taking longer than expected, so having a clear, accurate file at the start is increasingly important.[lunellaw]

Application for Naturalization

The core form in this process is **Form N-400, Application for Naturalization**, which USCIS uses to determine whether you qualify for citizenship. The official Form N-400 and its instructions are available as a PDF from USCIS and related government resources, and USCIS also supports online filing for many applicants.

The form asks detailed questions about your **biographic data, immigration history, residence and employment, trips outside the U.S., marital history, and any criminal or security issues**, so complete and truthful answers are essential. USCIS emphasizes using the **current edition** of the form and following the instructions closely to avoid delays in **naturalization citizenship** cases.

Supporting Documents Needed

USCIS expects specific **supporting documents** with your N-400 so that officers can verify your eligibility. Common documents include:

- Copy of the **front and back of your green card**.
- **Government-issued photo ID**, such as a driver's license.
- **Marriage certificate**, divorce decree, or death certificate, if your marital history is relevant to your case.
- **Tax returns or IRS transcripts** for recent years, especially if requested in your local office's guidance.
- **Court or police records** for any arrests, charges, or convictions, even if they were dismissed.[reginfo]

Lunel Law's naturalization content emphasizes creating a **citizenship document checklist** and organizing these materials up front, which helps reduce the risk of Requests for Evidence (RFEs) or denials based on missing information.

Timeline and Expectations

People often ask **"how long does citizenship take?"** or **"how long to become a US citizen?"**, and the answer depends on two main pieces: (1) your required time as a permanent resident, and (2) USCIS processing times for N-400.

A helpful way to think about the timeline is:

Stage	Typical Range (Approximate)
Time as a lawful permanent resident before you can apply (3- or 5-year rule)	3 to 5 years, with some able to file 90 days early
USCIS processing of Form N-400 (biometrics, interview, oath)	Often about 8–14 months, varying by field office and case complexity

USAFacts' analysis of recent data notes that the **full journey from green card to citizenship can take roughly 3 to 6 years**, depending on how you obtained your green card and local USCIS processing times. Pollak Immigration similarly describes a two-part timeline: the 3- or 5-year residence period plus an additional 8–14 months for USCIS to complete the N-400 process.

How long does it take to become an American citizen?

Putting these pieces together, **how long does it take to become a US citizen** or **to get an American citizenship** usually depends on your starting point:

- Many green card holders become eligible under the **5-year rule**, with some able to file **90 days before** the 5-year mark if they meet all other criteria.

- Spouses of U.S. citizens who qualify under the **3-year rule** may apply earlier, again with a 90-day early filing window, if they continue to live in marital union with the U.S. citizen spouse.
- After filing, **USCIS processing**—from N-400 submission through biometrics, interview, and oath—often adds around **8–14 months**, though some cases are shorter or longer.

This is why many reputable sources answer **“how long does it take to get citizenship?”** with a practical range of about **3 to 6 years from receiving a green card to becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen**, depending on your path and on USCIS backlogs.

Neutral Note

Naturalization rules are detailed, and small variations in your travel history, family situation, or criminal or immigration record can significantly affect **when you can file naturalization** and whether USCIS will approve your case. If you are unsure which rules apply or have a complex history, it can be helpful to review official USCIS resources and, where appropriate, speak with a qualified U.S. immigration attorney who regularly handles naturalization and family-based immigration matters.

Disclaimer: This article is for general informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. Immigration law

changes frequently, and outcomes depend on individual facts. For guidance on your specific situation, consult a qualified U.S. immigration attorney or official USCIS resources.