

2025 Rheumatoid Arthritis Research Request for Proposals (RFP)

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1 RFP Overview

Funding Opportunity Title	Advancing Understanding of Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) Disease Onset, Progression, and Treatment Response
Funding Organization	The Arthritis Foundation
Expert Advisors	Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee (MSAC); MSAC RA Working Group
Funding Opportunity Purpose	This Request for Proposals (RFP) invites applications that seek to better understand and predict the development, progression, and treatment response of RA. This includes applications focused on investigating the conversion of pre-RA to clinical RA, disease progression, and treatment response and safety. Competitive projects should aim to define risk factors/biomarkers of conversion of pre-RA to clinical RA, disease progression, treatment response, pathogenic mechanisms, and/or therapeutic approach personalization.
Budget	1. Pilot Research Award: Up to \$150,000 inclusive of 8% indirect costs 2. Large Research Award: Up to \$450,000 inclusive of 8% indirect costs
Period of Performance	1. Pilot Research Award: Up to 2 years 2. Large Research Award: Up to 3 years
Posted Date	April 7 th , 2025
Letter of Intent Due Date	June 2 nd , 2025 All LOIs are due by 2:00 PM ET
Full Proposals Invited	June 23 rd , 2025
Full Proposal (by Invitation Only) Due Date	August 4 th , 2025 All applications are due by 2:00 PM ET
Awardees Notified	September 2025
Project Start Date	January 1 st , 2026

2 RFP Information

2.1 Background

In alignment with the Arthritis Foundation's mission to boldly pursue a cure for America's #1 cause of disability, the Foundation supports scientific research that will lead to improved treatments for arthritis and improved quality of life for people living with arthritis. The long-term goal of this Arthritis Foundation research program is to reduce the incidence of RA, slow disease progression, and improve the lives of people with RA.

This RFP invites research proposals of two types:

- A. **Pilot Research Award:** Projects aim to investigate a novel hypothesis with no preliminary data requirements. Budget of up to \$75,000 per year for 2 years (up to \$150,000 total per award inclusive of 8% indirect costs)
- B. **Large Research Award:** Projects require preliminary data. Budget of up to \$150,000 per year for 3 years (up to \$450,000 total per award inclusive of 8% indirect costs).

2.2 RFP in Brief

This RFP invites research proposals focused on RA development, progression, and treatment response. Research studies using exclusively clinical samples and/or clinical data are strongly encouraged. Research proposals that include both animal studies and the study of clinical samples and/or data may be considered, provided the animal studies help to more deeply uncover mechanisms suggested by the clinical data.

2.3 Topics of Interest

Areas of focus for successful proposals may include, but are not limited to:

- Identification of mechanisms underlying:
 - Initial autoimmunity related to RA
 - Pre-RA (defined as systemic elevations of RA-related autoantibodies prior to the development of clinically apparent RA) conversion to clinically diagnosable RA
 - Disease progression
 - Treatment response/non-response
 - Refractory disease
- Development of biomarkers to predict:
 - Disease susceptibility
 - Disease onset
 - Disease progression
 - Disease course
 - Response or non-response to treatment
 - Treatment safety
- Examination of interventions to:
 - Delay RA onset
 - Slow disease progression
 - Treat refractory disease
 - Decrease the impact of and/or shorten flares
 - Manage symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, and mood disturbance
- Clinical trials addressing topics above within the scope of the award budget are welcome

2.4 Out of Scope Topics

For this cycle of this RFP, we are not accepting applications focused on the following topic areas:

- Proposals focused on preclinical models without connection to clinical data or samples
- Proposals focused solely on creating biobanks or creating/growing patient cohorts without inclusion of experimental work relevant to the scientific topics of interest above
- Proposals focused on non-RA forms of arthritis

Applications focused on these topics will be administratively rejected.

3 Award Information & Eligibility Criteria

3.1 Eligible Institutions

Eligible Institutions include:

- U.S. Public/State Controlled Institutions of Higher Education
- U.S. Private Institutions of Higher Education
- Nonprofits with 501(c)(3) IRS Status (Other than Institutions of Higher Education)

Non-domestic (non-U.S.) Entities (Foreign Institutions) and Non-domestic (non-U.S.) components of U.S. Organizations are not eligible to apply.

3.2 Eligible Applicants

Eligibility Criteria for Applicants:

- All proposed research projects must be led by a Principal Investigator (PI) who holds a doctorate (e.g., Ph.D., M.D., or equivalent degree).
- Applicants who hold the rank of full Professor (or equivalent) are **excluded** from applying for these opportunities.
- **For Pilot Awards:** PIs must hold a full-time faculty/staff appointment up to and including the rank of Associate Professor (or equivalent) or be a clinical or postdoctoral research fellow at an academic or other non-profit research institution within the United States. Applicants holding non-tenure track, full-time, independent faculty-level positions with titles such as Instructor, Assistant Research Professor, or similar are eligible to apply.
 - For purposes of this RFP, a postdoctoral fellow is an individual who holds a doctoral degree (Ph.D., M.D., or an equivalent degree), who is engaged in a temporary period of mentored research for the purpose of acquiring the professional skills needed to pursue a career path of their choosing.
 - For the purposes of this RFP, clinical fellows are individuals who are in subspecialty fellowship training and are working at an eligible institution (see above criteria).
 - Clinical and postdoctoral fellows must have a minimum of 75% protected research time.

- **For Large Awards:** PIs must hold a full-time faculty/staff appointment up to and including the rank of Associate Professor (or equivalent). Applicants holding non-tenure track, full-time, independent faculty-level positions with titles such as Instructor, Assistant Research Professor, or similar are eligible to apply. Postdoctoral fellows and clinical fellows are *not* eligible to apply for this award type.
- If previously funded by the Arthritis Foundation, the applicant must be up to date on all reporting requirements.
- Individuals currently holding the role of PI on an active Arthritis Foundation RA Research Program award are not eligible to apply unless their current award ends by December 31, 2025.
- Multiple applications will be accepted from a single institution, provided that each application has a different applicant PI and represents a distinct hypothesis.

4 General Application and Submission Information

4.1 Overview

The submission process includes, first, a Letter of Intent (LOI) and, second, a full proposal (by invitation only). All LOIs and full proposals (collectively, applications) should be submitted using Proposal Central, the Arthritis Foundation's online grants management portal available at <https://proposalcentral.com/>. Some information submitted in support of an application will be typed directly into a webform on Proposal Central and some will be submitted as a PDF uploaded to Proposal Central (known as an "attachment" in Proposal Central). Technical support regarding the Proposal Central platform is available via email to pcsupport@altum.com.

Any application that is submitted after the deadline, incomplete, or fails to adhere to instructions will be administratively rejected.

4.2 Formatting of Attachments

These format requirements apply to all attachments submitted in support of either the LOI or the full proposal.

- Margins should be greater than or equal to 1/2" on all sides
- Font size should be no less than 11 points
- Applications must be written in English
- Applications must be formatted such that, if printed, would print to 8.5" x 11" paper
- PDF file formats are preferred
- Editing permissions must not be restricted and files must not be password protected.

The page limits do not include the additional biosketches, references, letters of support, and table of contents that will also be a part of all proposals.

4.3 Letter of Intent (LOI)

The LOI, 2 pages maximum in length, should 1) describe the fit of the proposed project to the overarching goals of this program, 2) include a hypothesis and specific aims, 3) summarize at a high level the impact you expect from the work, and 4) briefly describe the roles of the individual team members (including patient representatives or patient research partners as applicable).

LOIs will be evaluated for both administrative compliance and scientific merit. Top LOIs will be invited to submit full proposals.

4.4 Full Proposal

Below is an overview of the sections in the Proposal Central webform and the information that should be entered into or attached in each section.

- 1.1 **Title page:** Enter project title. Select award type (Pilot or Large Grant).
- 1.2 **Download Templates & Instructions:** Download RFP
- 1.3 **Enable Other Users to Access this Proposal:** Allow others (e.g., institutional administrators or collaborators) to view, edit, or submit your proposal. Electronic signatures are required to submit the application. The Signing Official from the applicant's institution must be provided at least 'Edit' access on this screen to be able to sign. Please review the Signature Page (see below) to confirm the signature roles required and add as appropriate on this page. *Please make sure to grant access ahead of time to your institution's signing official to avoid any last-minute issues with signing and submitting your application.*
- 1.4 **Applicant/PI:** Key information about the PI.
- 1.5 **Institution & Contacts:** Key information about the PI's institution, including name and email address of the financial officer and the signing official who, in addition to the PI, will be contacted if the award is selected for funding. If your institution has a ROR (Research Organization Registry ID), please include.
- 1.6 **Other Key Personnel:** List and provide contact information for key persons. Include everyone except the applicant who will contribute to the scientific development or execution of the project in a substantive, measurable way whether they receive salaries or compensation under the grant.
 - **Mentors:** Applicants who are postdoctoral or clinical fellows must name an individual who will serve as their mentor for the project. Mentors must hold a full-time, faculty position at the rank of Assistant Professor (or equivalent) or higher. They need not be at the same institution as the applicant but should have expertise in the subject matter proposed.

- **Patient advocate:** When relevant, the Arthritis Foundation encourages the study teams to include patient perspectives and/or patient advocate(s) who are meaningfully engaged in the research project. We define meaningful engagement as active and collaborative interaction between patient(s) and researchers across all stages of the research process from conception to results distribution, where research decision making is guided by patients' contributions as partners, recognizing their specific experiences, values, and expertise.
 - Study teams are also encouraged to compensate patient partners per National Health Council guidelines (see "Principles for Compensation" linked via: <https://nationalhealthcouncil.org/additional-resources/patient-compensation-tools/>).
- 1.7 Abstracts:** Provide a general audience abstract (non-technical, patient-friendly) and a technical abstract (maximum of 2,000 characters each). Please note: the general audience abstract will become public if the award is selected for funding, therefore, it should not contain any proprietary information.
- 1.8 Budget Period Detail:** Enter budget detail for each 12-month award period requested.
- Up to 8% of the total budget may be dedicated to indirect costs (F&A).
 - Fringe benefits for personnel salaries are allowable.
 - Include any costs associated with sharing resource outputs.
 - The total cost of salary and fringe support must not exceed 75% of total project costs. Requests for salary and fringe support beyond 75% may be considered but require a letter of justification for why this is necessary for the goals of the project to be achieved.
 - The total cost associated with animal care and experiments may not exceed 25% of total project costs.
- 1.9 Budget Summary & Justification:** A summary of the budget detail will be shown in this step. In addition, provide a detailed explanation of why the requested budget is appropriate.
- 1.10 Other Support:** Please list all current and pending support for the Applicant and Co-Investigators. Any overlap of current or pending support with the Arthritis Foundation proposal must be described and explained. Current and pending support can be added to your (and other Key Personnel's) Professional Profile on Proposal Central by clicking on the 'Professional Profile' tab and going to Step #10: Other Support. To add your entries, please click on the "+" link and all entries previously saved in your Professional Profile will show. Please select the applicable support and save. For other Key Personnel, if they have granted you at least 'View' access to their profile, you can select Other Support from their profile as well. If they have not provided you 'View' access, upload a list of their current and pending support and any overlap in a separate document in step #14 of the application.

- 1.11 Data & Resource Sharing Plan:** While not strictly required, data and resource sharing are an expected outcome from grants funded by the Arthritis Foundation. Provide the requested information as to how the data and other resources generated as part of the research project will be shared.
- 1.12 Organization Assurances:** IRB and IACUC approvals, if applicable.
- 1.13 PI Demographics:** Please enter your ORCID ID and other requested demographic information.
- If you do not have an ORCID ID, you can register for one here: <https://orcid.org/register>.
 - The Arthritis Foundation aims to fund research representing the whole RA research ecosystem and therefore encourages applications from all eligible researchers in order to maximize progress towards realizing our research goals.
 - Please note that requested demographic information will NOT be shared with reviewers and will NOT be used in any way during the application selection process. The Arthritis Foundation collects such data to track applicant and awardee demographics over time to gain a better understanding of the make-up of its applicant and awardee pools and, when necessary, update its' strategies to connect with the broadest possible research community.
- 1.14 Proposal & Supporting Documents:** Upload the following:
1. Research Proposal:
 - **For Pilot Awards:** 5 pages single space maximum
 - **For Large Awards:** 8 pages single space maximum
 - Applicants are encouraged to use the suggested layout below
 - *Specific Aims Page:* A page that highlights the significance, hypothesis, objective, approach, expected results, and impact of the proposed project. NIH style is encouraged.
 - *Scientific Background and Research Plan:* This section summarizes the overall importance of the proposed work, including the problem statement, hypothesis and when available, any preliminary results, plus a Proposed Approach and Specific Methodology, including a Statistical Plan, a detailed study timeline, Alternative Hypotheses & Pitfalls, Patient Impact & Significance to the Arthritis Foundation's Mission, and Rationale and Fit with RFP Purpose & Objectives.
 - *Description of Key Personnel, Facilities, and Resources:* Proposed PI, and proposed team governance structure, including, if applicable, how patients, parents, caregivers, or other advocate(s) will be incorporated into the research team. Description of facilities and resources that will enable project completion. In particular, applications

where the PI is in a mentored position should directly address how the duration and access privileges of that position relate to the requirements and duration of the proposed project.

- *Additional Information:* Any additional information relevant to the Review Criteria listed below.
 - 2. NIH Biosketches: For Applicant/PI and relevant Key Personnel (Co-Investigator, Collaborator, and Mentor roles only).
 - 3. Current and Pending Support: For the Applicant, Mentor, and any Co-Investigators only. Upload here ONLY when this information cannot be entered in the Other Support section of the application.
 - 4. Letter from appropriate institutional representative (e.g., Division Chief, Institutional Finance Official, etc.) that documents that the budgeted percent effort is available, confirms Applicant's salary and acknowledges that the Foundation's indirect rate is acceptable.
 - 5. Letters of Support or Collaboration.
 - **For Pilot Awards:** Letter of support from the mentor is required for all applications on which the PI is in a mentored position. Mentor letters should address the support provided to the PI by the mentor.
 - **For Large Awards:** Optional
- 1.15 Validate:** Check for any missing information.
- 1.16 E-Signature:** *Before submitting the application*, an electronic signature is required from both the Applicant/PI and a Signing Official from the applicant's institution. Type your name in the text box and click the green 'Sign' button. A date and time stamp will appear next to the button indicating that the electronic signature was successful. To give the Signing official access to sign this application, enter their information in Step #1.3: "Enable other users to access this proposal" and grant them at least "Edit" access.
- 1.17 Submit:** No proposals will be accepted after the deadline. Technical support for the on-line application system is not available after 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time or on weekends.

5 Selection Process and Award Management

5.1 Review and Selection Process

Applications will be evaluated for scientific merit by an expert Review Committee that includes both scientific and stakeholder reviewers, convened by the Arthritis Foundation, and using the review criteria below. As part of peer review, all applications will receive a written critique in Proposal Central.

The following factors will be considered in making final funding decisions:

- Scientific and technical merit of the proposed project determined by scientific peer review.
- Patient impact and significance of the project to the Arthritis Foundation's mission as determined by stakeholder review.
- Alignment of the proposed project to the Arthritis Foundation's strategic priorities.
- Availability of funds.

A formal email notification will be provided to the applicant's organization for successful applications. An award notification is not an authorization to begin performance. Any costs incurred before contract signature are at the applicant's risk.

5.2 Review Criteria for Scientific Reviewers

- **Overall Impact**

Scientific Reviewers will provide an overall impact score to reflect their assessment of the likelihood for the project to exert a sustained, powerful influence on the understanding and ability to predict the development, progression, and treatment response of RA in consideration of the review criteria below.

- **Scored Review Criteria**

Reviewers will consider each of the review criteria below in the determination of the scientific merit and strategic importance of each proposal. An application does not need to be strong in all categories to be judged likely to have major scientific impact. For example, a project that by its nature is not original may be essential to advance the field. The list of evaluation factors is presented below.

- **Significance**

Does the proposal address an important problem or a critical barrier to understanding the development, progression, and treatment response of RA? How will successful completion of the project's aims reduce the incidence of RA, slow disease progression, and improve the lives of people with RA?

- **Originality**

Does the proposed research project challenge and seek to shift current paradigms by utilizing novel concepts, approaches, or methodologies? Does the design/research plan include original elements, as appropriate, that enhance its potential to advance scientific knowledge or clinical practice?

- **Approach**

Are the overall proposed strategy and methodology well-reasoned and appropriate to accomplish the specific aims of the project? Have the investigators presented strategies to ensure a robust and unbiased approach, as appropriate for the work proposed? Is a robust analytical plan included? Are

potential problems, alternative strategies, and benchmarks for success presented?

- **Study Timeline**

Is the projected timeline feasible and well justified? Does the project incorporate efficiencies and utilize existing resources (e.g., CTSAs, practice-based research networks, electronic medical records, administrative database, or patient registries) to increase the efficiency of participant enrollment and/or data collection, as appropriate?

- **Principal Investigator(s), Scientific Team, and Environment**

Do PI(s), collaborators, and other researchers have appropriate experience and expertise to carry out the project? Does the research team have complementary and integrated expertise; is their leadership approach, governance, and organizational structure appropriate for the project? Is the institutional support, equipment, and other physical resources available to the investigators adequate for the project proposed? If a clinical trial is proposed: Are the administrative, coordinating, enrollment, and laboratory/testing centers appropriate?

- **Protections for Human Subjects**

For research that involves human subjects but does not involve one of the categories of research that are exempt under 45CFR 46, the committee will evaluate the justification for involvement of human subjects and the proposed protections from research risk relating to their participation according to the following five review criteria: 1) risk to subjects, 2) adequacy of protection against risks, 3) potential benefits to the subjects and others, 4) importance of the knowledge to be gained, and 5) data and safety monitoring for clinical trials.

- **Inclusion of Women, Minorities, and Individuals Across the Lifespan**

When the proposed project involves human subjects and/or clinical research, the committee will evaluate the proposed plans for the inclusion (or exclusion) of individuals based on sex/gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as the inclusion (or exclusion) of individuals of all ages to determine if it is justified in terms of the scientific goals and research strategy proposed.

- **Budget and Period of Support**

Reviewers will consider whether the budget, staffing plan and the requested period of support are fully justified and reasonable in relation to the proposed statement of work. Indirect costs (F & A) must be 8% or less as per Arthritis Foundation policy.

5.3 Review Criteria for Stakeholder Reviewers:

Stakeholder Reviewers will evaluate each of the following:

- A. **Patient Impact:** How will this proposal address the overall health and wellbeing of arthritis patients?

B. Significance to the Arthritis Foundation's mission: How does the significance of the proposed research advance the mission of the Arthritis Foundation?

Mission: The Arthritis Foundation is boldly pursuing a cure for America's #1 cause of disability. We're championing the fight to conquer arthritis with life-changing science, resources, advocacy, and community connections.

C. Use of Human Subjects: If this is a study that involves human subjects, how likely is it that arthritis patients would be interested in participating?

5.4 Award Management and Reporting

Awardees will be required to submit Progress Reports every six months and Accounting Reports every year via Proposal Central in addition to Final Progress and Accounting Reports once the project is complete. Individual awards are based on the application submitted to, and as approved by, the Arthritis Foundation and are subject to the specific terms and conditions identified in the signed Award Agreement.

6 Questions and Additional Information

We encourage inquiries concerning this funding opportunity and welcome the opportunity to answer questions from potential applicants.

For all inquiries including general grants information and questions regarding application instructions, application, and processes, please email:

AFscience@arthritis.org