

Request for Applications: 2026 Doctoral and Postdoctoral Research Fellowships

Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation
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Contracting Officer: Tanya Stevenson, Chief Executive Officer, MDF
Location: United States, Canada, and eligible international sites
Date Issued: March 14, 2025
Proposals Due: September 5, 2025
Selection Notification: by December 19, 2025
Period of Award: January 1, 2026 – December 31, 2027
Anticipated Award: Doctoral: \$55,000 (includes funding for required travel)
Postdoctoral: \$105,000 (includes funding for required travel)
Number of Awards: To be determined based on applicant mix and available funds

Synopsis

Through this Request for Applications (RFA), the Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation (MDF) seeks to engage new scholars in the field of myotonic dystrophy (DM) to advance understanding of the disease and develop therapies for DM. Through this effort, the MDF intends to fund doctoral and postdoctoral research fellowships for projects that focus on basic, translational, and/or clinical research or care in myotonic dystrophy.

Fellowships may be awarded for projects with qualified sponsors in appropriate academic, research institute, or pharmaceutical/biotechnology company environments. Projects may focus on basic, translational, and/or clinical research or care in myotonic dystrophy.

Goal

By funding doctoral and postdoctoral research projects on basic, translational, and/or clinical research or care in myotonic dystrophy, the Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation seeks to engage new DM scholars with a sustained commitment to advancing disease understanding and therapy development.

Background

MDF is committed to improving the future of DM research through our impactful Research Fellows Program. This signature initiative has empowered 52 talented individuals, achieving a remarkable 96% retention rate in the DM field. Over \$5 million has been invested since 2009, fostering a lasting impact on the field.

Grant Focus Areas

Myotonic dystrophy is a chronic and multi-systemic disease that affects the lives of DM patients and their families every day. There are two major types of myotonic dystrophy: type 1 (DM1) and type 2 (DM2). Both types of myotonic dystrophy are inherited, autosomal dominant disorders affecting all areas of the body. The primary clinical manifestations are progressive muscle wasting and weakness affecting the lower legs, hips, hands, shoulders, neck, and face in DM1 and progressive muscle wasting and weakness affecting the proximal leg, hips, shoulders, and neck muscles in DM2. Research indicates that as many as 1 in 2,100 individuals in the United States are affected by myotonic dystrophy or at risk of passing the disease to the next generation.ⁱ

People with this disorder may have prolonged muscle contractions (myotonia) and may not be able to relax certain muscles after use, affecting grip and speech, for example. They may also develop cataracts, cardiac conduction defects, and infertility. Many patients demonstrate CNS effects, including white matter abnormalities that are associated with central fatigue, excessive daytime sleepiness, and difficulties in executive function. A severe and infantile form of DM, congenital myotonic dystrophy, is characterized by weak muscle tone (hypotonia), breathing and swallowing problems, delayed development, and CNS involvement that results in intellectual disability.

Opportunity for DM Research

Recognizing that the symptoms and the severity of DM vary widely among affected people and often severely impact activities of daily living, mobility, and independence, **the MDF is soliciting scientific proposals for Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowship awards, which include research focused on improving treatment, care, and support of DM patients and their families, as well as all basic science aspects of DM.**

The MDF is actively soliciting Doctoral and Postdoctoral fellowship proposals for basic, clinical, or applied research directly related to myotonic dystrophy in:

- Pathogenesis
- Molecular basis underlying phenotype differences (Type 1, 2, congenital)

- Development of diagnostics and biomarkers
- Progression/natural history
- Identification and validation of drug treatment endpoints
- Standards of care and care integration, including nursing, social work, and psychology
- Epidemiology, economics, and support services
- Therapeutic development, particularly, but not limited to, early-stage projects where success can leverage larger investments

Research on DM2 is prioritized for this award.

Duration of Doctoral or Postdoctoral Research Fellowship

Awarded fellowships are for two years, with second-year funding dependent on the successful completion of the first year's stated objectives. Prior to the actual awarding of the grant, the applicant must have fully met all the requirements of her/his institutional country for residency, where applicable. Applicants may apply once per calendar year. Once receiving an award, grant recipients are not eligible to apply for three calendar years. Applicants may only apply for one type of MDF grant at a time and may only receive one grant during the duration of their award. The Small Grants Program is an exception to this rule (please see the specific RFA for more information).

Payment

Doctoral and Postdoctoral Research Fellow awards are made to the applicant organization on behalf of the fellow.

- **Doctoral Award.** \$55,000 for salary, benefits, travel, and research support, paid over two years:
 - \$5,000 of the award is for required travel to the MDF Annual Conference, and to the biennial IDMC meetings (see below).
- **Postdoctoral Award.** \$105,000 for salary, benefits, travel, and research support, paid over two years:
 - \$5,000 of the award is for required travel to the MDF Annual Conference, and to the biennial IDMC meetings (see below).

Travel funds of \$5,000 are included to fund attendance by the MDF Doctoral and Postdoctoral Research Fellows at the biennial International Myotonic Dystrophy Consortium meeting (IDMC) and the MDF Conferences. Travel funds not used for these purposes must be returned to the MDF at the end of each year of the funding period. The MDF awards may not be used to fund institutional capital cost recovery, overhead, or other indirect costs.

Second-year funding of an MDF Doctoral or Postdoctoral Research Fellowship award is contingent upon documentation of satisfactory progress. A progress report satisfactory to the MDF is required four weeks after the end of each award year. The Foundation can cancel the award for non-compliance with any of the eligibility rules herein or due to non-performance.

Applications

Eligibility Requirements

Applications are limited to those from academic institutions and/or non-profit research institutes. For-profit organizations are not eligible for this RFA. Applications from non-U.S. academic institutions or non-profit organizations are permitted, as long as they are accredited academic medical centers or research institutes.

1. *Degree requirements.* Doctoral applicants must be enrolled and in good standing in a Ph.D. program at an accredited academic medical center or research institute. By the time of the award, the applicant must have completed two years of a doctoral program, including formal coursework and any qualifying examination requirements, and have selected a sponsor who focuses a major portion of their lab's activities on DM.

Postdoctoral applicants must have a Ph.D., M.D., D.O., or other doctoral degree in their profession from an accredited domestic or foreign institution before an MDF Fellowship award can be activated. The degree must be received within no more than three years before the fellowship period. Documentation of successful completion of a doctoral degree must be submitted prior to the start of the award. The sponsor of the applicant must focus a major portion of his or her lab's activities on DM.

2. *Commitment to myotonic dystrophy research.* The MDF supports doctoral and postdoctoral scholars with outstanding potential to make contributions to myotonic dystrophy research. Previous work in this area is strongly encouraged but not required. However, the applicant should document how previous experiences and interests will enhance the proposed research to address important questions related to myotonic dystrophy. The applicant and sponsor must demonstrate a strong and enduring commitment to current and future research in this area.

3. *Sponsor.* The applicant must identify a qualified sponsor to directly oversee and supervise the research activities. That sponsor must have background experience in myotonic dystrophy or a field of study relevant to the candidate's application and be willing to actively support the applicant. The sponsor must document the availability of space, facilities, and research support to provide an outstanding training experience. For applicants who propose continued work at an institution where they have been engaged for more than one year, it is important that the sponsor document how the MDF award will enhance the opportunity for new research experiences and broaden the scientific and/or clinical background of the applicant. It is expected that the sponsor will encourage and assist the prospective Doctoral or Postdoctoral Fellow with the application. Co-sponsors are encouraged when projects utilize a multidisciplinary approach (e.g., two co-sponsors, one in a biotechnology company and the other in academia, for an early-stage drug discovery and development project).

Submission Process and Requirements

Proposals must be submitted in 12-point font. Proposals must be submitted via the Proposal Central application system by September 12, 2025, at 5 PM Pacific Time. The proposal must include the following sections:

Applicant

- Professional Profile
- ORCID iD
- NIH-style applicant bio sketches (not to exceed 4 pages each)

Applicant Institution Information

- Applicant Institution Profile
- IRS EIN or TIN Number
- Signing Official Email
- Financial Official Email

Sponsor and Key Personnel

- Professional Profile
- ORCID iD
- Percent effort
- NIH-style bio sketches of all participating team members (not to exceed 4 pages each)

Abstract

- **Abstract of Research Plan.** A complete, scientific description of the proposed work so that it may be separated from the application. This abstract will not be made public (one-half page).
- **Lay Summary.** A general, non-scientific description of the proposed work. If funded, the lay summary is to be used and published in appropriate places by the Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation (one-half page).

Budget

- Detailed budget (Authorized expenses include: Salary and fringe benefits, equipment and supplies, and travel expenses- up to a maximum of \$2,500 per year/ Unauthorized expenses include: Institutional costs, indirect expenses, educational fees, payments to governing body members, illegal or inappropriate payments, and non-research purposes.)
- Budget description and justification, including explanations of how uncovered salary/benefits or research costs will be met (1 paragraph)
- Description of other sources of funding (1 paragraph)

Publications

- List of current publications

Attachments

- **Applicant Statement.** Including the applicant's name, contact information, a listing of current funding, a description of other pending applications for research funding during the funding period, a description of how previous experience and research interests will align with this project to address important questions related to myotonic dystrophy, and a description of a demonstrable, long-term commitment to research related to myotonic dystrophy (1 page).
- **Description of environment.** Including facilities, equipment, and any leveraged funding (2 paragraphs).
- **Project Research Plan.** This must include the following information (total should not exceed 6 pages):
 1. Background and hypothesis (1 page)
 2. Specific aims of the project (1 page)
 3. Translational significance of the project (one-half page)
 4. Preliminary data (1 page)
 5. Methods, data analysis plan (including interpretation, expected results, significance, statistical analyses, and assessments of statistical power whenever applicable), and pitfalls/alternative strategies (2 pages)

6. Anticipated collaborative agreements, if applicable (one-half page)
 - **References.**
 - **Support Letters.** Including one from the Sponsor and one from another individual with knowledge of the applicant.

Review and Selection

All applications must be received by 5:00 PM Pacific Time on Friday, September 5, 2025. The MDF Scientific Advisory Committee will score and prioritize candidates based on the following criteria:

- The impact the proposed research could have on the quality of life of people living with DM. Reviewers will rank proposals based on the case for the impact made by the applicant in the “Lay Summary” component of the application (approximately 25% of the total score).
- The strength of the applicant’s commitment to the research and the likelihood that they will continue to pursue research that advances knowledge relevant to improving the quality of life of people living with DM. This will be assessed based on the information provided by the applicant in the “Statement from the Applicant” component of the application and via the submitted letters of support (approximately 50% of the total score).
- The feasibility and scientific quality of the proposed research. This will be assessed by a subject matter expert selected by the Foundation based on the research description provided by the applicant. Applicants may suggest expert reviewers in their field for the Foundation to consider engaging for this evaluation (approximately 25% of the total score).

Proposals deemed to be infeasible or of poor scientific quality will be a low priority for funding regardless of the proposal’s scores on the other dimensions.

Applicants are welcome to consult with the MDF Chief Scientific Officer, Dr. Andy Rohrwasser (Andy.Rohrwasser@myotonic.org) for refinement of their proposals before submission. Technical issues should be directed to the MDF Research Grants Manager, Dr. Nadine Ann Skinner, at nadine.skinner@myotonic.org.

After initial screening by MDF staff members, the Scientific Advisory Committee and selected experts will review applications and recommend final candidates to the MDF Board of Directors. The MDF Board of Directors will consider the Scientific Advisory Committee recommendations and determine final grant awards. Awards are made at the

sole discretion of the MDF Board of Directors and are contingent upon the availability of funds. Availability of funds does not signify a commitment to award any grants. If no applicant is deemed of sufficient scientific merit, expertise, and/or skill, MDF may choose not to award a grant during this funding cycle.

Reporting and Publications

Progress Reports

Each grant recipient must submit six-month progress reports to MDF during the course of the two-year grant:

- Six-month **progress reports** to be received by the MDF twice per year during the award years.
- A **final report** (including an abstract in lay language) submitted to the MDF no later than one month after completion of research at the end of the second year.

Expense Reports

Each grant recipient must submit end-of-year expense reports to the MDF during the course of the two-year grant:

- An **interim expense report** (including the original proposed budget and final expenses on the grant) submitted to the MDF no later than one month after completion of research at the end of the first year.
- A **final expense report** (including the original proposed budget and final expenses on the grant) submitted to the MDF no later than one month after completion of research at the end of the second year and should be submitted along with a check for any unexpended funds on the grant. The grant recipient may reallocate up to 10% of the total grant award budget between line items without prior approval.
- A request for a “no-cost extension,” if required, must be submitted in writing at least two weeks before the end of the grant year for which the extension is requested and may be granted for no more than six months.

Publications and Conferences

- Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowship recipients are encouraged to submit at least one scientific paper for publication within six months of the conclusion of the research, reporting the research findings. All papers, exhibits, and press releases directly resulting from MDF funding shall carry a credit line to the MDF.

- If the grant recipient is aware that a press release is being prepared about the work or the grant recipient has been contacted by a journalist, please let MDF know this is taking place. Grant recipients should encourage their university press offices or outside journalists to contact the MDF so that publicity can be coordinated. Press releases regarding the study funded by MDF shall be emailed to grants@myotonic.org.
- MDF encourages an open-access policy that enables the unrestricted access and reuse of all peer-reviewed published research funded, in whole or in part, by the MDF. MDF shall pay reasonable fees required by a publisher or repository to effect immediate, open access to the accepted article. This includes article processing charges and other publisher fees. While not needed to fulfill the open-access policy requirements, grant recipients are encouraged to deposit funded research consisting of their submitted manuscript, and its subsequent versions, on a preprint server.
- Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowship recipients must attend virtually or in-person at all MDF Annual Conferences and biennial IDMC conferences and present at the MDF Annual Conference (travel funds are included).
- The title of each study funded by MDF, together with the lay language abstract of the research, the names of the grant recipient, and the institution, will be published on the MDF website, in MDF newsletters, in annual reports and wherever else MDF deems appropriate. The grant recipient will always be clearly acknowledged. The lay summary description should not contain information the grant recipient does not wish to divulge to the general public.
- Grant recipients are required to provide one (1) 500-750 word research article to be potentially included in the MDF Dispatch News for the greater DM community.

Timeline

Date Issued:	March 14, 2025
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ⁱ 5. Johnson NE, Butterfield RJ, Mayne K, et al. Population Based Prevalence of Myotonic Dystrophy Type 1 Using Genetic Analysis of State-wide Blood Screening Program. *Neurology*. Published online January 20, 2021:10.1212/WNL.0000000000011425. doi:10.1212/WNL.0000000000011425