Beyond 50

Fred Hutch Cancer Center

Pilot Funding: Momentum to Power Research Advances

October 2026

You Can Plant the Seeds for Breakthroughs

Every scientific breakthrough starts as a spark that ignites a researcher's curiosity: It could be a surprising observation, a serendipitous conversation with a colleague or patient, or access to a new technology platform. Next comes a question that researchers at Fred Hutch Cancer Center ask every day: "Is this idea worth pursuing?"

Often, the only way to find out is by launching a pilot project, a small-scale, time- and resource-limited experiment that lets a scientist follow an idea far enough to learn if it warrants deeper study. For nascent ideas, pilot awards allow researchers to quickly test the waters — by searching for patterns in a dataset, for example, or documenting how a specific type of immune cell interacts with cancer — to generate the proof-of-concept data needed to successfully compete for larger grants.



Your gift helps people everywhere

Fred Hutch is defined by an unwavering belief in what's possible when people come together to fund research that transforms our understanding of disease and our ability to prevent, detect, and treat it. Fred Hutch was among the nation's first federally designated cancer centers, and the discoveries made here continue to shape cancer and infectious disease care across the country and beyond.

Later in the research cycle, pilot awards provide targeted funds to complete a defined task — like validating a preclinical model or mapping out a manufacturing protocol — that can pave the way for commercial partnerships or get more-advanced projects to the next critical stage of development.

Some pilot projects ultimately yield advances that change clinical practice, break through longstanding scientific barriers, or unlock new possibilities for the next generation of scientists. And even when they don't, they still add to the foundation of scientific knowledge, creating ripples that send researchers in new directions.

At Fred Hutch — where some of the world's most creative and accomplished scientists and clinicians work at the vanguard of cancer and infectious disease research — we offer internal pilot funding that can provide a boost of momentum for nearly every stage and type of research.

These pilots are powered by donors like you.

Your gift to support our pilot funds is a potentially game-changing investment to increase the volume, breadth, and pace of research. We think about it like this: If these awards are the seeds for future breakthroughs and Fred Hutch is the fertile soil in which they grow, philanthropy is the reservoir that nurtures the entire ecosystem, enabling it to thrive.

Beyond 50

For more than 50 years, Fred Hutch has been looking beyond what's possible today to a new era of discovery. With your partnership, our Campaign for Fred Hutch is transforming the pace and scale of innovation so we can redefine cancer and infectious disease for generations to come.

Nimble funding, faster results

This is a moment of incredible potential in cancer and infectious disease research. While opportunities for discovery are rapidly expanding, however, the external funding landscape is increasingly constrained.

Donor support for pilot funding is especially powerful in this challenging environment, because it strengthens our researchers' competitive advantage for a diminishing number of federal grants. And this, in turn, allows us to keep pace with the urgency of the need for tailored, effective prevention strategies and treatments.

Pilot awards are also more nimble than most other sources of funding because:

- Applications are intentionally simpler and less time-consuming than proposals for federal and foundation grants, reducing the burden on researchers.
- Turn-around time from application to project launch is typically three to four months — less than half the lead time than for federal grants — allowing investigators to start up new projects without breaking stride.

Across Fred Hutch, scientists have opportunities to apply for awards from nearly a dozen funds, in amounts that typically range from $100,000 to $250,000. The funds are each designed to accelerate research in distinct priority areas, such as precision oncology and immunotherapy, or to bridge crucial steps in the development cycle.

Applications are reviewed by panels of faculty members, who are the applicants' peers, and the projects with the highest scores receive funding. Invariably, however, more worthy proposals are submitted than there are resources to support them.

A deeper funding reservoir will make it possible to green-light more projects with scientific merit, which will speed up the research cycle, fuel more breakthroughs, and get much-needed advances to the patients who need them.



"Philanthropic support for pilot funding truly has an outsized impact on increasing the scope and speed of our research. That's what we need to make real advances in prevention, detection, and treatment."

Thomas J. Lynch Jr., MD
Fred Hutch president and director
and holder of the Raisbeck
Endowed Chair

Pilot funds for many purposes

Your gift of any size can contribute to a pilot fund that aligns with your interests and the impact you'd like to have. The examples below illustrate the range of pilot funds to which donors can contribute, but it is not an exhaustive list.

For instance, if you're interested in advancing foundational areas of research, consider supporting:

- **Stuart and Molly Sloan Precision Oncology Institute Ignition Awards,** which support proposals centered on precision oncology, a broad term for innovative approaches to tailor prevention, detection, and treatment approaches to a person's individual cancer and risk. (Two to three awards annually, up to $130,000 each.)
- **Basic Sciences pilot fund,** which drives fundamental research that challenges accepted paradigms and sparks new insights that ultimately impact prevention, detection, and treatment. (The numbers of awards and amount allocated each year depends on available funding.)



To fuel research that can transform care across different types of cancer, consider supporting:

- **Immunotherapy Catalyst Awards,** which fund early-stage projects that aim to turn ideas from Fred Hutch laboratories into cellular immunotherapies that improve outcomes for patients. (Up to five awards annually of $130,000 to $450,000, depending on the type of project and stage of research.)
- **Radiation Oncology pilot fund,** which supports innovative interdisciplinary radiation oncology research with the potential to improve cancer prevention, detection, or treatment. (Up to three awards annually of $80,000 to $90,000.)

For opportunities to advance research at crucial stages of development or researchers' careers, consider supporting these funds:

- **Evergreen Fund,** which advances promising projects with commercial potential before they have amassed enough data to attract a licensing partner or venture capital funding. (Five awards annually of $130,000.)
- **Hartwell Innovation Fund,** which supports projects led by young investigators, including assistant professors, staff scientists, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students. (Four awards annually of approximately $200,000.)

Pilot studies take root: Three examples

How can technology help smokers quit?



In 2012, Jonathan Bricker, PhD, received an $80,000 pilot award to launch a small study of a smartphone app he had developed to help users build skills to handle cravings, emotions, and thoughts that can trigger smoking. “The Hartwell grant was transformational,” says Dr. Bricker, who is a professor in the Cancer Prevention Program of Fred Hutch’s Public Health Sciences Division and holds the Endowed Chair in Cancer Prevention. Results from the pilot helped him secure $3.1 million from the National Cancer Institute for a larger trial, which showed that the app, iCanQuit, is more effective than other smoking-cessation tools. Since then, Dr. Bricker’s lab has received an additional $12 million to further develop iCanQuit and QuitBot, an AI-based smoking-cessation app. “Smoking is the single most preventable cause of cancer and premature death, and so far, our digital apps have touched more than 350,000 lives in helping people quit,” he says. “Pilot funding made it all possible.”

Do the microbes in patients’ guts affect how they respond to treatment?



With a $150,000 pilot award she received in 2025, Meghan Koch, PhD, an associate professor in Fred Hutch’s Basic Sciences Division, is exploring whether the makeup of a patient’s gut microbiome — the ecosystem of microbes living in the intestinal tract — affects their response to treatment for Merkel cell carcinoma (MCC), a rare and aggressive form of skin cancer. Paul Nghiem, MD, PhD, a physician at Fred Hutch and director of the Merkel Cell Carcinoma Collaborative Institute at UW Medicine, led practice-changing clinical trials of immunotherapy for MCC, but not all patients respond to these now-standard treatments. Recent research points to the gut microbiome as one possible factor, and Dr. Koch is using the pilot funds to analyze samples from the Nghiem Lab’s biorepository, a first step in learning whether microbiome-modulating strategies like fecal transplantation could possibly help patients.

Can we protect vulnerable people from common viruses?



In 2019, Jim Boonyaratanakornkit, MD, PhD, received a $50,000 pilot award to hunt for antibodies that protect against common respiratory viruses. While harmless for most of us, these viruses are dangerous for people who are immunocompromised, including the blood stem cell transplant patients he cares for. The pilot led to a breakthrough: the discovery of two antibodies that protect against four viruses. Since then, the project has snowballed, attracting $9 million in federal grants and sponsored research support — and a drug based on one of the antibodies he found is poised to enter first-in-human trials in early 2027. “Pilot funding is inherently risky, and some projects don’t take off,” says Dr. Boonyaratanakornkit, an assistant professor at Fred Hutch and UW Medicine. “But when they do, the rewards can scale exponentially.”

Join us

Transforming the pace and scale of research depends on exploring new ideas, following promising leads, or taking crucial next steps in a development cycle. That's why funding for pilot projects is a cornerstone of the Campaign for Fred Hutch.

Few institutions in the U.S. can match the breadth of competitive pilot funding Fred Hutch offers our researchers. This support is seed money in the truest sense; it helps promising ideas take root, and, for some, to ultimately grow into discoveries that change our understanding of cancer and infectious disease.

Please join us by making a gift to support pilot funding — and give scientists more opportunities to sow the seeds of breakthroughs.



Gifts for pilot projects nurture the most innovative ideas and accelerate the pace of research.

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