Scope of the call

> This call is issued within the WWTF instrument "project calls" (“Projekte”) specified in the WWTF Funding Guideline.

This call invites collaborative consortia to advance critical knowledge in post-acute infectious diseases, with particular emphasis on Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS), through innovative projects that push the boundaries of current understanding in etiopathogenesis, diagnostics, and therapeutic interventions. We seek novel research approaches that address unexplored questions in the field, building strategically upon preliminary findings from the first round of WWTF funding, while integrating experimental and clinical methodologies through interdisciplinary teams. Successful proposals must demonstrate meaningful partnerships between researchers, patient representatives, and relevant stakeholders, with particular encouragement for interdisciplinary collaborations that leverage diverse scientific expertise to tackle complex research challenges. While ME/CFS represents a primary focus area, this call recognizes the broader landscape of post-acute infectious diseases, welcoming projects that investigate other conditions within this complex disease cluster that feature post-exertional malaise as a key symptom, with the ultimate goal of accelerating breakthrough discoveries that will improve patient outcomes and advance scientific understanding of these challenging conditions.

Why ME/CFS?

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis / Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS) is a complex and poorly understood chronic disease. As part of the family of post-acute infectious diseases, it is characterised by a wide range of complex and serious, debilitating conditions with a variety of symptoms. This includes the cardinal symptom post-exertional malaise. Other symptoms like sleep dysfunction, pain, neurological/cognitive manifestations, as well as autonomic, immunological, and neuro-endocrinological symptoms are part of ME/CFS. Individuals with ME/CFS often do not return to pre-disease levels of activity. The cause of ME/CFS is currently unknown. ME/CFS affects individuals of all ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic groups. It is estimated that in Austria up to 80.000 patients suffer from ME/CFS, with women being more likely to be diagnosed than men.

The goal of this call is to support larger consortia building upon promising preliminary findings that address fundamental research questions to advance understanding of post-acute infectious diseases such as ME/CFS. Highly welcome are:

- Projects that push the state of the art
- Projects that bring together experimental & clinical approaches and bring together approaches from different scientific disciplines

- Projects that demonstrate meaningful partnerships between researchers, patient representatives, and relevant stakeholders

The focus is on advancing the understanding of post-acute infectious diseases such as ME/CFS. However, projects investigating other post-acute infectious diseases that show substantial post-exertional malaise in their phenotype are also eligible for funding. Please note that solely observational projects in clinical settings and health service research do not fit the scope of this call.

Phenotypic Characteristics

ME/CFS: The definition of ME/CFS must be based on either of these international consensus criteria

- Canadian Consensus Criteria (CCC) or the revised CCC
- International Consensus Criteria
- NICE Guidelines for ME/CFS
- IOM 2015 Diagnostic Criteria

Post-acute infectious diseases (PAIS): Other post-acute infectious diseases can also be investigated as part of the proposed research projects. Recent research has shown significant overlap in the biological mechanisms between a wide range of post-acute infectious diseases. Projects investigating other post-acute infectious diseases are therefore also invited (e.g., Long COVID). To be included in the scope of this call, the disease to be studied must meet the phenotypic criteria of post-exertional malaise as defined by one of the above-mentioned international consensus criteria.

Preliminary data and continuity

In this call, it is important to demonstrate continuity in your research approaches. Proposals must demonstrate continuity with previously funded exploratory WWTF ME/CFS projects based on generated preliminary data. Research questions and work plans should be developed along these lines, offering new perspectives and avenues of research, and/or crossing fields. It is important to present the status quo (whether positive or negative results have been achieved) and provide strong arguments to further develop the intended research.

Partnerships between researchers, patient representatives and relevant stakeholders

Proposals must demonstrate a clear strategy for structured, long-term engagement of carefully selected stakeholders throughout the research process, including patients (if possible), patient representatives, and other relevant non-academic partners. Consortia should show how they will implement formal structures and formats for stakeholder involvement—for example, through project governance roles like advisory boards, co-design of research processes and/or research priorities through regular consultation.

We particularly encourage innovative approaches to building partnerships with societal stakeholders that go beyond traditional engagement methods (e.g. science communication, online dashboards) and create genuine collaborative relationships by granting non-academic partners ownership of selected project outcomes.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

In this call we encourage the collaboration between biomedical, computer and clinical sciences and other disciplines. The interdisciplinary expertise required for the proposed research project may be based within the same research group that received funding in the first round or traverse research groups and institutions. WWTF highly encourages the collaboration beyond already exisiting working groups. Plans for collaboration between expertise groups must be demonstrated throughout all critical stages of the project, from formulation of the research question, experimental design to data analyses.

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