

Research Projects

NEXT – Rethink Neurodegeneration!

Profile Area: Exploration

Deadline: August 28, 2025 (2 pm CEST)

This call invites interdisciplinary research teams to **rethink** established paradigms and explore new paths in dementia-causing neurodegeneration. It supports high-risk, exploratory basic research that moves beyond conventional approaches to uncover fundamental disease mechanisms. With this initiative, the Volkswagen Foundation aims to drive transformative progress and lay the basis for future preventive and therapeutic breakthroughs.

This call is part of the funding framework "NEXT", which is the overarching umbrella for different thematic calls, all of which are intended to stimulate advances within the scientific landscape and to focus on what could be 'next'. Within this framework, the Volkswagen Foundation intends to take up new or less explored research topics and approaches that have a high knowledge potential and relevance for the future.



Research Area: Basic research in the natural and life sciences



Funding Type: Interdisciplinary research projects with 2-5 PIs/Co-PIs



Target Group: Postdoctoral researchers and professors at German universities and other research institutions, international collaborations are possible



Max.: 2 million EUR



Max.: 5 years



Two-stage selection process starting with an anonymously evaluated short proposal, followed by a full proposal and a presentation to the review panel

1 Objectives

The aim of this call is to uncover fundamental disease mechanisms of dementia-causing neurodegeneration. Researchers are encouraged to **rethink established paradigms, explore new, uncharted paths** and integrate interdisciplinary perspectives in basic research. High-risk and pioneering ideas are explicitly encouraged. By supporting projects that challenge conventional approaches and embrace risks in both theoretical concepts and methodological approaches, the Volkswagen Foundation aims to provide the momentum for transformative progress in the field.

Over the past decades, significant progress has been made in understanding the underlying mechanisms of dementia-causing neurodegeneration. Nevertheless, many fundamental questions remain unanswered and some key findings appear to be contradictory or incomplete.

One major challenge is that patients with dementia exhibit a mix of pathologies rather than a single type, making it difficult to pinpoint causal mechanisms. For instance, observations show that both cognitively healthy older adults and individuals with Alzheimer's disease can display beta-amyloid plaques and tau tangles, prompting ongoing research and discussion about their precise role in the development and progression of the disease. This complexity along with the discrepancies in the field, highlight the need to take a step back, critically reassess existing approaches, and create space for unprejudiced exploration of paths not taken before.

We are convinced that the combination of **interdisciplinary collaboration** and **basic research** is key to tackling the complexity of the field. To ensure long-term progress, this call encourages teams to bring together junior and senior researchers.

2 Scope of Funding

The Volkswagen Foundation offers funding for interdisciplinary research projects with 2 to 5 principal investigators (1 PI and up to 4 Co-PIs), providing a maximum of 2 million EUR over a funding period of up to 5 years.

The call is open to researchers from the postdoctoral level onwards in the natural and life sciences at German universities and research institutions. The PI must be affiliated with a German university or research institution. Researchers from international institutions can participate as Co-PIs. In international collaborations, the German partners must be in the majority and make a substantial contribution, both financially and in terms of content.

Eligibility Criteria

1. Basic Research and Thematic Focus

This call exclusively supports basic research aimed at uncovering the mechanisms underlying dementia-causing neurodegeneration. Innovative methodological approaches needed to answer research questions are welcome. Clinical studies or drug development fall outside the scope of this call.

Projects may address, but are not limited to the following overarching topics:

- Understanding the heterogeneity of defined disease entities
- Exploring gene-environment interactions and the role of age as risk factor for dementia
- Mechanisms of resilience, resistance, adaptation and plasticity

2. Type of Research

The research must be in line with the following criteria:

- Rethink existing concepts related to dementia-causing neurodegeneration
- Unprejudiced exploration of new directions and previously overlooked paths
- High-risk, high-gain research with the freedom to fail, but with the potential to reshape common perspectives on neurodegeneration, drive groundbreaking discoveries, or even establish entirely new paradigms

Projects that are in line with established research approaches and that could be funded by public funding agencies do not fall within the scope of this call.

3. Team Qualification and Composition

The research team must meet the following criteria:

- Exceptional project-specific and complementary expertise
- Interdisciplinary constellation; relevant fields include, but are not limited to molecular biology, (epi)genetics, immunology, neuroscience, systems biology, computational biology and bioinformatics
- Balanced mix of junior and senior researchers

3 Application and Selection Procedure

3.1 Overview

- Deadline for the submission of a short proposal: August 28, 2025 (2 pm CEST)
- Invitation to submit a full proposal: first quarter of 2026
- Presentation of the research team to the review panel: approx. 06/2026
- Final decision: last quarter of 2026

3.2 Procedure

Funding decisions are made through a two-stage selection process:

Stage 1: Anonymous short proposal

Applicant teams must first submit a short proposal, which will undergo an internal eligibility check before being **anonymously** evaluated by external reviewers. Applicants will be informed whether they are invited to submit a full proposal approximately 5 months after the deadline. Those invited will receive detailed information about the subsequent submission process and the respective new deadline. A minimum of at least six weeks will be granted to prepare the full proposal.

Stage 2: Full proposals and presentation

Full proposals (not anonymized) will be evaluated by an interdisciplinary review panel. As part of this process, each team will present its project to the panel. Based on the panel's recommendations, the Volkswagen Foundation's Board of Trustees will make the final funding decisions.

Important note for both stages: We reserve the right to include a random selection process in the decision, if necessary.

4 Information on the Application

4.1 Our Funding Platform

Applications and short proposals have to be submitted via the Volkswagen Foundation's [funding platform](#). All templates (short proposal and CV) are available for download on the funding platform and on the website for the respective programme announcement. Please only use the templates available for download when submitting your application.

In the case of international participation, the partner at the German research institution must create the application in the funding platform and be defined as PI. Otherwise, PI and Co-PI(s) are equal partners.

It is important that all applicants (PI and Co-PIs) register early on in the process. Co-PIs can only be invited to work on an application if they have registered.

For further support please contact support@volkswagenstiftung.de.

4.2 Information on Enclosures

4.2.1 Short Proposal

Please use the template available for download on the funding platform or on the website for the programme announcement. Make sure to adhere to the specified page and word limits. Please note that the **short proposal must be submitted anonymously**. Avoid any direct or indirect references that could reveal your identity. This includes for example personal names, institutional affiliations, specific self-citations or publications, grant references or funding sources, geographic locations, logos or acknowledgments. Short proposals that do not comply with these anonymity requirements may be excluded from the review process.

4.2.2 Curricula Vitae

Please submit the curricula vitae of all applicants (PI & all Co-PIs) in tabular, narrative form, using the template available for download on the funding platform or on the website for the programme announcement.

4.3 Further Information

4.3.1 Overheads

With the exception of Max Planck, Leibniz, Fraunhofer and Helmholtz institutes, public or non-profit scientific institutions in Germany can apply for up to 10% overheads in addition to the direct project costs. The same applies to comparable scientific institutions abroad. For more information on overheads, see 'Information on Lump Sum for Overheads', which is provided at our [download section](#).

Note: Overheads are not required in the brief budget plan at the short proposal stage.

4.3.2 Open Science

The foundation is committed to Open Science ([Open Science Policy](#)). Thus, we expect that results will be published open access and that data generated will be made available for scientific use following the FAIR principles via recognized repositories (see [NFDIs](#), [re3data](#), and [RI-sources](#)).

Note: The Volkswagen Foundation offers the module 'Data Reuse - Additional funding for the preparation of research data' for funded projects to prepare research data. You can apply for the module during or up to six months after the project duration.

4.3.3 Animal Studies

The foundation expects applicants to avoid animal experiments wherever possible and to prioritize non-animal laboratory methods and materials (e.g., recombinant antibodies, non-animal sera, and gels). The foundation acknowledges that non-animal materials and methods may be more expensive and is willing to cover these higher costs.

4.3.4 General Information

The foundation cannot be held responsible for any obligations prior to the receipt of grant approval.

Applications that have been or are intended to be submitted in this or a similar form to another funding organization will not be processed by the foundation. Applications that do not meet the formal requirements will not be considered for review. The foundation can only award funds to scientific institutions.

5 Contact

Dr. Theresa Kratzsch
Email: kratzsch@volkswagenstiftung.de
Phone: +49 511 83 81 - 363

Dr. Franziska Rönicke
Email: roenicke@volkswagenstiftung.de
Phone: +49 511 83 81 - 262

For administrative/organisational issues
Tatjana Peters
Email: peters@volkswagenstiftung.de
Phone: +49 511 83 81 - 397

VolkswagenStiftung
Kastanienallee 35
30519 Hannover, GERMANY

6 Further Information

- [Website VolkswagenStiftung](#)
- [Website programme announcement](#)
- [FAQ and Service \(including download section\)](#)
- [Influence of Generative AI on Research and the Volkswagen Foundation's Funding Activities](#)
- [Recommendations for Sustainable Travel](#)