

Environmental Toxins and the Aetiology of Neural Tube Defects

CALL FOR RESEARCH FUNDING | 2026–2027

Up to four research projects, each lasting up to three years, may be supported from an indicative annual funding envelope of €100,000.

Key dates

Stage	Deadline or decision date
Stage 1 outline application deadline	31 December 2026
Stage 1 decision	30 January 2027
Stage 2 full proposal deadline	15 April 2027
Final funding decision	June 2027

Purpose of the call

The Hjelt Foundation invites research proposals investigating the role of (environmental) toxins in the aetiology of neural tube defects (NTDs). Proposed studies may examine causal pathways, mechanisms, or interventions with the potential to prevent NTDs. Human and experimental studies are eligible.

Projects must address clearly defined research questions concerning toxins or teratogens. Relevant exposures may include chemicals or other defined substances encountered for instance through occupational settings, living conditions, lifestyle, contaminated foods or water, therapeutics, or exposures in context of *in-vitro* fertilisation procedures. The research should focus on exposure in the prenatal period.

Research priorities

1. Originality and the potential to advance the field
2. A clear and measurable contribution to knowledge of the causes or prevention of NTDs
3. Interdisciplinary and innovative approaches
4. Scientific and operational feasibility using established infrastructure and resources

Eligibility and scope

Applicants must be established researchers based at a university or equivalent research institution (anywhere in the world). The principal investigator and the research team must have a demonstrable track record relevant to the proposed study. Multidisciplinary applications are encouraged.

Only one proposal may be submitted per institution.

Outside the scope of this call

The following applications will not be prioritized for funding:

1. Purely descriptive studies, case series, or literature reviews
2. Research on the clinical care of infants or children born with NTDs or that have conditions associated with NTDs, including hydrocephalus
3. Research focused on the effects of smoking or alcohol
4. Projects that are not directly related to the call topic

Two-stage application process

Stage 1 — Outline application

Submit an outline application of no more than two pages. It must include:

1. Names and institutional affiliations of the applicant(s)
2. A brief introduction to the research area (two to three sentences)
3. The project aims and objectives
4. A concise description of materials and methods
5. Expected outcomes
6. The project's novelty and potential contribution to the prevention of NTDs
7. A brief summary of the applicants' relevant qualifications and experience
8. An indicative and proportionate budget

Stage 2 — Full proposal

Applicants selected at Stage 1 will be invited to submit a full proposal of no more than ten pages. It must include:

1. An abstract of no more than 200 words
2. A detailed description of the rationale, aims, objectives, methods, and expected outcomes
3. Clearly defined, measurable outcomes directly related to NTDs or specific NTD subtypes
4. A detailed and justified budget
5. An ethics approval statement, where applicable
6. A risk assessment and mitigation plan
7. A project timeline
8. A reference list of no more than 30 references

The following attachments are required and do not count towards the ten-page limit:

- Curriculum vitae of the principal investigator
- A brief description of the research group and the institutional resources available to the project

Funding and project duration

The Foundation anticipates an indicative total funding envelope of €100,000 for this call. The number and size of awards will depend on the scientific quality, scope, feasibility, and justified budget of the submitted proposals, as well as on the funds available. Applicants should request only the funding required to deliver the proposed work and must justify the costs. Projects may run for a period of six months to three years (the Foundation will distribute a maximum of €100,000 for all projects combined per year).

Eligible costs

- Equipment and investigations directly required for the project
- Salaries at pre-doctoral level, including PhD or Master's students
- A study nurse if directly required for the proposed research

Costs that will not be covered

- Establishment of general research infrastructure or health and clinical care units
- Salaries for postdoctoral or established researchers or clinicians
- Conference attendance
- Publication costs

Assessment criteria

Full proposals in Stage 2 will undergo peer review and will be assessed against the published criteria below.

Criterion	What will be assessed	Maximum
1. Research team	Relevant expertise and capacity to conduct the proposed research	5
2. Scientific quality	Scientific rigour, originality, and potential to advance the field	5
3. Implementation	Feasibility, work plan, use of resources, and appropriateness of the budget	5
4. Relevance and impact	Contribution to knowledge of the causes of NTDs and potential future impact on prevention	5
Total		20

Projects with the highest scores will be prioritized for the final funding decision.

Review and decision process

1. The Foundation will check all Stage 1 submissions for eligibility and compliance with the call requirements.
2. The Hjelt Foundation Board will assess eligible outline applications and invite selected applicants to submit a full proposal.
3. Full proposals will undergo peer review by independent reviewers with relevant scientific expertise.
4. Following peer review, shortlisted applicants may be invited to discuss their proposal with the Board in an online meeting. An invitation to present does not indicate that funding has been awarded.
5. The Board will make the final funding decisions and notify principal investigators by email. Brief feedback will be provided. The Board's decisions are final, and appeals will not be considered.

Submission instructions

Applications must be submitted as a single PDF file and must follow the requirements for the relevant stage.

1. Email submissions and enquiries to callsNTD@hjeltfoundations.org
2. Use the subject line: NTD Call 2026–2027 — Stage 1 — [Principal Investigator surname]
3. Submit by the stated deadline; late applications will not be accepted
4. Comply with the stated page limits; applications exceeding the applicable limit will be rejected
5. Revisions or resubmissions will not be accepted within the same funding round

Stage 1 deadline: 31 December 2026

After an award

Before an award letter or grant agreement is signed, the successful applicant will be asked to provide a 150–200-word public summary of the project and a photograph of the principal investigator.

Contact

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