Fondation pour la recherche sur le cancer

CALL FOR PROJECTS

PANCREAS 2026

Understanding and overcoming therapeutic resistance in pancreatic cancer

-

Call text

1. Background

With almost 16,000 new cases diagnosed in France in 2023, pancreatic cancer represents a major health issue[1]. Its incidence continues to rise, and by 2030, it is expected to become the second leading cause of cancer-related deaths. Despite advances in diagnostic and therapeutic research, the prognosis remains extremely poor, with a 5-year survival rate of around 11%. Although several potential determinants have been proposed, reliably defining risk factors for pancreatic cancer remains challenging[2], underscoring the need for intensified research in this area.

The poor outcome can notably be explained by this unclear aetiology, which hampers any preventive action and leads to a late diagnosis, a high metastatic potential, a high tumour heterogeneity, and above all **a major resistance to standard existing treatments** (chemotherapy, targeted therapy, radiotherapy, immunotherapy).

One hallmark of pancreatic cancer is the presence of a **highly developed tumour stroma** that can account for 70% to 90% of tumour volume[3]. Complex interactions between tumour cells, the microenvironment, and stromal components contribute to limiting the effectiveness of current treatments, notably by reducing drug penetration and immune infiltration.

Beyond the stroma, multiple mechanisms have recently emerged as key determinants of therapeutic resistance[4, 5].

- Intrinsic factors:
    - oncogenic mutations: **KRAS,** TP53, CDKN2A or SMAD4.
    - cancer stem cell plasticity.
    - metabolic reprogramming, etc.
- Extrinsic factors: the **microbiota** (intra tumoral and/or digestive tract) has been shown to influence immuno-modulation within the tumour microenvironment but also the response to systemic chemotherapy and immunotherapy[6].

Therefore, the comprehension of the molecular, cellular, and microenvironmental determinants underpinning therapeutic resistance is critical, particularly for the development of more effective therapeutic modalities.

[1] INCa, 2025 – Panorama des cancers en France.
[2] Boilève A, ESMO Gastrointest. Oncol. 2025
[3] Sherman MH, Annu Rev Pathol. 2023
[4] Lencioni G, Semin. Cancer Biol. 2024
[5] Espona-Fiedler M, Biochem Pharmacol. 2024
[6] Nista EC, Biomedicines 2023

Since 2022, the Fondation ARC has decided to foster on pancreatic cancer as a research priority. The first calls for proposals supported projects on early diagnosis and neoadjuvant therapies, and then on stroma characterization. In view of the major challenges posed by therapeutic resistance, the Fondation ARC decided to pursuit its commitment and launch a call for projects dedicated to the **understanding of therapeutic resistance mechanisms in pancreatic cancer and to the development of innovative strategies overcoming such resistance**.

Funding for the selected projects might be supported by Fonds pour Bertrand Kamal.

2. Objective

This call for projects (CFP) aims **to elucidate the mechanisms underlying therapeutic resistance in pancreatic cancer and to foster the development of innovative strategies capable of overcoming such resistance.**

3. Scope of the CFP

In the context of this CFP, the notion of therapeutic resistance is defined as the phenomenon where cancer cells are or become unresponsive to treatment, leading to a worsening of the patient's condition or relapse and increased mortality.

Projects can be in the field of basic, translational or clinical research.

Projects may include, but are not limited to:

- Investigating the role of the pancreatic tumoral microenvironment (stromal, immune cells, …) in therapeutic resistance.
- Investigating the impact of the microbiota on pancreatic tumour response to therapy and approaches to overcome associated resistance.
- Targeting the mechanisms of therapy resistance to improve the efficacy of existing treatments.
- Exploring the role of recently emerging approaches, such as pharmacometabolomic.
- Proposing novel treatment approaches (therapeutic combinations, new modes of administration).
- Etc.

4. Characteristics of the projects

For all projects:

- The proposed project must **be relevant to the field of pancreatic cancer research**.

- The project must be feasible during the requested funding period. A description of the project's feasibility, analyses within the allotted time and a timetable of project stages must be included. If necessary, the timetable should include a review of regulatory milestones and negotiations with industry.
- In addition to its scientific excellence, the project must present the most reliable guarantees in terms of ethics and must be conducted within the framework of existing legislation.
- The Fondation ARC encourages fair research that is free from biases related to gender, social status or other inequalities.

A. Characteristics of basic projects

- The research project must **target therapeutic resistance in pancreatic cancer**, whether to understand its mechanisms or to propose new ways of overcoming this resistance.

B. Characteristics of translational projects

- The research project must **target therapeutic resistance in pancreatic cancer**, whether to understand its mechanisms or to propose new ways of overcoming this resistance.
- The project **must involve at least 2 teams.**
- The project may be based on existing cohorts and/or on existing clinical trials (ancillary study).
- The project may be prospective (use of material to be collected) or retrospective (use of previously collected material).
- The study design must be rigorous, based on a sound research hypothesis, a complete statistical analysis plan and a well-defined study population with an indication of the potential response to the research hypothesis.

C. Characteristics of clinical projects

- The research project must **target therapeutic resistance in pancreatic cancer**.
- The project **must be a phase 1 and/or 2 clinical trial.**
- The project **must involve at least 2 teams.**
- A strong scientific rationale (biological evidence) supporting the hypothesis and objective of the trial is required.
- Clinical trial evaluation criteria must be clearly defined.
- Drugs with marketing authorization but whose authorization does not cover pancreatic cancer will be accepted.

- Drugs without marketing authorization will only be accepted if the pharmaceutical company undertakes to make them available free of charge.
- The project may be associated with the creation of a biological collection to reinforce the biological concept under study.
- The study design must be rigorous, based on a sound research hypothesis, a complete statistical analysis plan, a well-defined study population and a justification of the initial research hypotheses. The projected inclusion schedule must be detailed (see ANNEX 2 "Expertise criteria").

5. Project duration and funding

The duration and maximum amount granted will be specific to the type of research:

- For a basic research project: **maximum €450,000** over 3 years
- For a translational research project: **maximum €600,000** over 3 or 4 years
- For a clinical research project: **maximum €1,000,000** over 3 to 5 years

6. Eligibility criteria

Applications that do not meet the eligibility criteria will not be considered.

- The project must fall within the scope of this call for projects.
- Unless otherwise specified, the application must be written entirely in **English**.
- The application must be submitted by the project leader, who will be the coordinator recognized by the teams associated with the project. He/she undertakes to commit him/herself fully to setting up and monitoring the project.
- The project leader must hold a permanent position in a French hospital, university, or research establishment (civil servant or permanent contract); failing this, the project leader must provide proof of a temporary position covering the period of the grant applied for.
- The same researcher/clinician can only **coordinate one project under the present CFP** but can be associated with several projects. Attention will be given to the involvement of a project leader as collaborator to one or several other projects in order to verify the overall feasibility.
- Each of the teams involved in the application, including the trial sponsor (if applicable), must belong to a public research organization (university, EPST, EPIC…), a non-profit organization/institution (associations, foundations…) or a public health establishment.
- The participation of foreign and/or private partners is possible as long as they provide their own funding for the project.

- Where applicable, and in order to ensure project feasibility, availability and access to samples and patient clinical data must be secured and detailed (see ANNEX 1 for "Mandatory documents").
- Where applicable, project sponsors must enclose the following documents (see ANNEX 1 for "Mandatory documents"):
    - A letter of commitment in principle from the sponsor to carry out the trial if the project is selected for funding.
    - A commitment in principle from the pharmaceutical company specifying the conditions of participation, and in particular the free provision of medicines without marketing authorization.

7. Exclusion criteria of the CFP

- Projects whose intellectual property is exclusively industrial (particularly in the case of research backed by industrially-promoted clinical trials).
- For translational projects: funding will not be provided for work specific to clinical trials (trial set-up, promotion, patient enrolment, investigation, etc.). Only data collection and analysis carried out as part of ancillary studies in support of clinical trials will be taken into account (collection, storage and analysis of samples, data analysis, modelling, statistical analysis, etc.).
- Phase III clinical trials.

8. Funding procedure

A. Eligible expenses

- Operating costs, including computer licenses and royalties, and field acquisition work (travel expenses related to surveys, etc.).
- Clinical trial costs, in particular:
    - Academic promotion of the trial (administrative procedures to open the trial, insurance, eCRF, follow-up, etc.), patient enrolment.
    - Purchase of drugs studied in the trial (only if they have market authorization).
    - Costs related to biological samples (collection, storage, dispatch to storage centre).
- Services are authorized. However, private service providers (start-ups, biotech companies, etc.) must not claim any intellectual property rights on the results that emerge from the projects.
- Publication costs.
- Equipment.
- Computer hardware (computers, accessories and software), provided this is justified in the financial application.

- Recruitment of non-permanent staff (post-doctoral researchers, engineers, technicians, data managers or other professionals dedicated to the clinical trial) for a period not exceeding that of the grant.
- Mission expenses (participation in conferences, congresses, etc.). Except in exceptional circumstances, and subject to justification, mission expenses may not exceed 4% of the total amount.

The budget is freely allocated, particularly regarding the proportion devoted to financing personnel.

B. Non-eligible expenses

- Management fees for managing organizations.
- Salaries of thesis students.
- Internship allowances and bonuses.
- Vacations.
- Office supplies.
- Subscriptions to learned societies and/or membership fees.
- Equipment maintenance costs.

9. Project selection process

Projects will be appraised as follows:

- An *ad hoc* international committee will examine the applications (see ANNEX 2 "Appraisal criteria") and issue its recommendations. The project leader will respond to comments made by the committee and will make the requested improvements within approximately 10 days (around the second half of September 2026).

- The Scientific Board of the Fondation ARC, in the light of the expert appraisals carried out by the *ad hoc* committee, will select the applications and make its recommendations to the Board of Directors, which will vote on the funding.

All applications are appraised in compliance with the confidentiality agreement and the procedure for preventing and managing conflicts of interest established by the Fondation ARC.

10. Provisional timetable of the CFP

- Call for projects launched: March 12th, 2026
- **Return of applications: June 11th, 2026, 2pm**
- Projects appraised by an international ad hoc committee: Summer 2026
- Selection by the Scientific Council of the Fondation ARC: September 2026
- Decision by the Fondation ARC Board of Directors: October 2026

- Notification of results: end of October 2026
- Start of projects: end of 2026/begin of 2027

11. Submission procedure

- **The complete application must comply with these instructions** and be submitted online at:

appelsaprojets.fondation-arc.org
no later than June 11th, 2026 2pm

- Be careful: For the application to be admissible, the project leader has to submit it online before the closing date (click on "submit my application package").
- Until the closing date, the project leader can re-open/modify his/her application as many times as desired.
- An acknowledgement of receipt will be sent by email to the project leader, upon validation of the online application.
- The **mandatory documents** required for scientific and technical assessment of the project, **has to be submitted online by June 11, 2026, or September 7, 2026** (see ANNEX 1 "Mandatory files").

- Optional supplemental information: Until September 7, 2026, the project leader can supplement the application package, in the annex tab, with the following documents:

- Publication update: manuscripts that are in review or have been accepted for publication (please, attach letter from the publisher and acknowledgement of receipt).
- Notification of changes in the administrative situation.
- Notification of acceptation/use of any grant obtained from another funding organization.

12. Contact

 pancreas@fondation-arc.org

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 www.fondation-arc.org/appels-a-projets/

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ANNEX 1: Mandatory files

To be admissible, the application must be submitted online at appelsaprojets.fondation-arc.org along with the mandatory files indicated in the table below:

Mandatory files	Content	Format	Deadline for online submission
If applicable: Sponsor's commitment in principle	A letter from the legal representative of the institution agreeing in principle to act as sponsor if the project is selected to be funded. In this letter the sponsor should also agree to making the results obtained publicly available.	Free format, generated by the applicant	**September 8, 2026** (upload online)
If applicable: Pharmaceutical company's commitment in principle	An agreement in principle from the pharmaceutical company to supply the drug if the project is selected for funding. Drugs without marketing authorisation must be provided free of charge.	Free format, generated by the applicant	**September 8, 2026** (upload online)
If applicable: Letter of commitment to provide samples Certified by: trial sponsor **or** bio-bank operational manager **or** pathologist in charge of sample collection	• Availability and number of biological samples and/or data included in the project; • Agreement allowing access to these biological samples and/or data; • Conditions and expected date for the provision and/or transfer of the samples and/or data; • Terms of agreements on intellectual property rights; • Compliance with regulations concerning data storage (French Data Protection Authority [CNIL] declaration, etc.); Quality accreditation of the organization (indicate any potential NF or ISO accreditations).	Free format, generated by the applicant	**June 11, 2026 2 pm** (to upload in the online application, section "Clinical research")
Scientific signature sheet	Signatures of the associated team leaders and/or persons in charge of the research facilities.	Downloadable online	**September 8, 2026** (upload online)

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ANNEX 2: Assessment criteria

The international *ad hoc* committee will review the applications in line with the 8 assessment criteria listed below, with a special attention to the quality of experimental design and statistical plan, studied population and feasibility of the work plan.

1. **Global scientific quality of the project and impact**
   Overall scientific quality and innovativeness
   Clarity of hypotheses and objectives
   Potential scientific and medical impact

2. **Relevance and originality of the project**
   Relevance of the project to the objective of the CFP
   Originality of the project

3. **Clarity of the biological hypotheses and the objectives**
   Clarity and appropriateness of the experimental design.
   Clear definition of the studied population.

4. **Quality of methodology, statistical analysis and the studied population**
   Appropriateness of the statistical methodologies.
   Comprehensiveness and quality of statistical analysis plan.
   Anticipation of potential problems, and proposal of alternative approaches
   Pertinence in the selection of the patients and samples; Justification of the sample size; Clear synopsis and/or study protocol.

5. **Competence of the applicants and quality of the research collaborations**
   Competence and expertise of the applicant and his/her team.
   Consistency and complementarity between the associated teams

6. **Feasibility of the work plan**
   Clarity of the work plan.
   Overall feasibility of the work plan.
   Appropriateness of the research environment, staff, and infrastructures.
   Provisional patient inclusion plan.

7. **Funding sustainability**
   Appropriateness of the project's financial plan.

8. **Ethical issues**
   Accordance with the legislation in force
   Respect for good clinical practice

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ANNEX 3: Summary of project features

For all projects :
Unless otherwise specified, the application must be written entirely in **English.** The project must fall within the scope of this CFP and aims **to elucidate the mechanisms underlying therapeutic resistance in pancreatic cancer and to foster the development of innovative strategies capable of overcoming such resistance**. The same researcher/clinician can only **coordinate one project under the present CFP PANCREAS 2026.**

Basic research project	Translational research project	Clinical research project
€450,000 over 3 years	**€600,000 over 3 or 4 years**	**€1,000,000 over 3 to 5 years**
No minimum number of teams involved	Minimum 2 teams involved	Minimum 2 teams involved
	- Project based on existing cohorts and/or on existing clinical trials (ancillary study). - Prospective or retrospective project. - Funding is not provided for activities specific to clinical trials; only data collection and analysis carried out as part of ancillary/translational studies are eligible.	- Phase 1 and/or 2 clinical trials. - the project may be associated with the creation of a biological collection to reinforce the biological concept under study.
Common mandatory annexes: - Signature form for scientific leaders (**September 8, 2026**)	**Common mandatory annexes:** - Signature form for scientific leaders (**September 8, 2026**) **Mandatory annexes specific to translational projects:** - Letter of commitment to provide samples (**June 11, 2026**)	**Common mandatory annexes:** - Signature form for scientific leaders (**September 8, 2026**) **Mandatory annexes specific to clinical projects:** - Letter of commitment in principle from the sponsor (**September 8, 2026**) - If using drugs without marketing authorization: Letter of commitment in principle from the pharmaceutical company (**September 8, 2026**)