Damon Runyon and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital Award 2026 Fellowships

The awards total a $1.5 million investment in a new class of pediatric cancer research fellows.

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The Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital have once again teamed up to support a new class of pediatric cancer research fellows. The awards, totaling a $1.5 million investment, will fuel the work of five fellows who will each receive funding for four years ($300,000 total). Each fellow will conduct an innovative research project with the potential to significantly impact the diagnosis or treatment of one or more pediatric cancers.

"This collaboration between Damon Runyon and St. Jude was designed to equip future scientific leaders nationwide with the resources to drive forward the most promising discoveries for children with cancer," said James R. Downing, MD, St. Jude president and CEO. "This class of fellows is focusing on research that will advance our understanding of hard-to-treat pediatric cancers, reduce treatment toxicity and long-term side effects, and develop more innovative therapies."

Launched in 2024, the Damon Runyon-St. Jude Pediatric Cancer Research Fellowship aims to address a funding gap that drives top talent to seek more prevalent opportunities in adult cancer research or the pharmaceutical sector.

"It is critically important that young researchers interested in pediatric cancer be given generous support to stay focused on the field, rather than having to broaden the scope of their work to meet available funding," says Yung S. Lie, PhD, president and CEO of Damon Runyon.

"All these advanced therapies for adult cancers are incredible and have revolutionized treatment. Children, however, haven't really seen those benefits because their cancers have different causes," says 2024 Damon Runyon-St. Jude Fellow Philip T. Pauerstein, MD, PhD. "We need dedicated resources like the Damon Runyon-St. Jude Fellowship to focus on what is causing pediatric cancers so that we can treat these cancers better."

In addition to the benefits associated with a fellowship from Damon Runyon, including the retirement of up to $100,000 of medical school debt, pediatric fellows are invited to attend an annual meeting with their colleagues hosted by the St. Jude Comprehensive Cancer Center.

2026 Damon Runyon-St. Jude Pediatric Cancer Research Fellows:

Keene Abbott, PhD, with sponsor Kimberly Stegmaier, MD, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston

Ewing sarcoma remains one of the most difficult pediatric cancers to treat, especially in relapsed or metastatic cases. Current therapies have changed little for decades and often cause serious long-term side effects, highlighting the need for more precise and less toxic treatments. Abbott's research focuses on a protein that cells rely on to copy and repair their DNA, and his work shows that Ewing sarcoma cells are unusually dependent on it — suggesting it may represent an Achilles' heel. Abbott aims to understand why this protein is so important for Ewing sarcoma cells and to evaluate whether blocking it could form the basis of a new therapy. His work may uncover a previously unrecognized vulnerability in Ewing sarcoma and help pave the way for safer, more effective treatments for children with this challenging cancer. Abbott received his PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and his BS from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Abigail Clevenger, PhD, with sponsors Julea Vlassakis, PhD, and Michael King, PhD, Rice University, Houston

Ewing sarcoma is a rare and aggressive bone cancer that affects children and young adults. A key genetic fusion in these tumors disrupts normal cell behavior, driving rapid growth and weakening the body's immune defenses. Studying this cancer in the lab is difficult because traditional cell cultures cannot fully capture the diversity of cells and immune interactions present in real tumors. Clevenger aims to bridge this gap by using advanced single-cell techniques to study how Ewing sarcoma cells build and reorganize their internal structures. By combining these novel approaches with analyses of patient tumor samples, her research will uncover how changes inside cancer cells help them evade the immune system and will point to new strategies for developing combination therapies for pediatric solid tumors. Clevenger received her PhD from Texas A&M University and her BS from Trinity University.

Amy Li, MD, PhD, with her sponsors Arlene Sharpe, MD, PhD, Harvard Medical School, Boston; and Benjamin Ebert, MD, PhD, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston

Although hematopoietic stem cell transplantation is the only curative treatment for some pediatric leukemia patients, chronic graft-versus-host disease (cGVHD) is a potentially life-threatening immune complication of stem cell transplantation. Li's research aims to mitigate the effects of cGVHD by enhancing the activity of regulatory T cells (Tregs), which are immunosuppressive T lymphocytes. Specifically, she is studying the effect of a novel class of drugs called thalidomide analogs on Treg survival and function. Li will use genetic screens, cell culture and mouse models

to elucidate the mechanisms by which thalidomide analogs alter Treg activity and to determine whether treatment with thalidomide analogs can mitigate cGVHD severity. She hopes that these studies will identify methods to strengthen Treg function and inform novel strategies to improve therapies for cGVHD. Li received her PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, her MD from Harvard Medical School, Boston, and her BA from Harvard University, Cambridge.

Emily Phillips, MD, with sponsor Todd A. Fehniger, MD, PhD, Washington University in St. Louis

Acute myeloid leukemia (AML) is a type of blood cancer that affects children and is treated with intense chemotherapy. Unfortunately, if this cancer recurs, it is difficult to treat with chemotherapy. More than half of children with recurrent AML die from the disease. Patients with recurrent AML are typically treated with immunotherapy, a type of treatment that leverages the body's immune system to kill cancer. Phillips studies a type of natural killer cell called memory-like natural killer cells, which have an enhanced ability to kill AML. Her project aims to help memory-like natural killer cells better recognize AML cells by outfitting them with one of two receptors, chimeric antigen receptors or natural killer cell engagers, to target common markers on the surface of AML cells. She hopes one or both methods can be translated into a clinical trial to treat children with chemotherapy-resistant AML. Phillips received her MD from the Medical College of Wisconsin and her BS from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Cary Weiss, MD, PhD, with sponsor Srinivas Viswanathan, MD, PhD, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston

Translocation renal cell carcinoma (tRCC) is a rare but highly aggressive kidney cancer that primarily affects children, adolescents and young adults. tRCC is driven by an abnormal fusion protein that forces cells to grow uncontrollably. Because these fusion proteins are extremely difficult to target directly with current strategies, and because tRCC responds poorly to existing treatments, patients and families are left with limited therapeutic options. Using innovative genetic and genomic tools, Weiss is identifying the critical pathways that tRCC cells rely on to survive. By uncovering the cancer's key vulnerabilities, his research aims to nominate new targets that could be developed into therapies. Importantly, because similar fusion proteins drive other rare pediatric and adolescent cancers, insights from this research may benefit a broader group of young patients facing these cancers. Ultimately, this work seeks to build a foundation for safer, more precise treatments. Weiss received his MD and PhD from Albert Einstein College of Medicine and his BA from New York University.

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