

Powering Progress: MRA Announces \$18.4 Million Global Research Investment to Accelerate the Next Era of Melanoma Breakthroughs

The investments focus on rare melanomas, metastasis, therapeutic optimization, immune response innovation, and diagnostics & biomarkers.

May 28, 2026 By [Melanoma Research Alliance](#)

The Melanoma Research Alliance (MRA), the world's leading non-profit funder of melanoma research, announced its largest annual global investment of \$18.4 million to advance the next generation of breakthroughs in melanoma detection and treatment.

This year's portfolio supports 30 discovery-stage research grants, alongside advancing the RARE Melanoma Research Consortium and the Melanoma Biorepository – critical infrastructure designed to unlock insights into the most complex and underserved forms of the disease. These investments span leading academic and medical institutions across the United States and 5 countries, reinforcing MRA's role as a global convener accelerating progress across the field.

Melanoma remains the deadliest form of skin cancer, with more than 234,000 new cases expected in 2026, of which 112,000 will be invasive melanoma. Despite meaningful advances in early detection and treatments, incidence continues to rise underscoring the urgent need for sustained investment in innovative research.

MRA rigorously reviews grants for their ultimate potential to move the field forward through accountable, collaborative efforts in five high priority strategic areas:

- Rare Melanomas: advancing research in understudied and difficult-to-treat subtypes of melanoma including acral, mucosal, and uveal.
- Metastasis: targeting the spread to the brain and other organs.

- Therapeutic Optimization: improving treatment outcomes.
- Immune Response Innovation: enhancing anti-tumor activity.
- Diagnostics & Biomarkers: enable earlier and more accurate detection and precision care.

MRA works with the best and brightest minds around the world who are singularly focused on improving outcomes and saving more lives.

2026 Melanoma Research Alliance Grant Awards

Young Investigator Awardees

The MRA Young Investigator Awards empower the next generation of early career researchers. In addition to funding bold new ideas, MRA's Young Investigator Award program is also a training ground for researchers through the interaction with a senior melanoma investigator serving as a mentor as they prepare for the future of their science careers.

Investigating IL-18BP blockade as a therapeutic strategy in melanoma

Dale Bottoms and John Ciesielka – MRA Young Investigator Award

David Schoenfeld, MD, PhD, Yale University

Pathology assessment of response for immunotherapy-treated melanoma

Denise and Michael Kellen – MRA Young Investigator Award

Julie Deutsch, MD, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Defining drivers of response and resistance in neoadjuvant immunotherapy

Lee and Debbi Alpert – MRA Young Investigator Award

Moshe Sade-Feldman, PhD, Massachusetts General Hospital

Castalagin prebiotic as a novel therapeutic modality for melanoma

Ellen and Gary Davis – MRA Young Investigator Award

Arielle Elkrief, MD, University of Montreal

DP1 receptor signaling in aging-associated immune dysfunction in melanoma

MRA Young Investigator Award

Jian Zheng, MD, PhD, University of Louisville Research Foundation

Dissecting circadian immunodynamics in melanoma

Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) London– MRA Young Investigator Award

Daniel Kirschenbaum, PhD, German Cancer Research Center

Anti-evolutionary rotational MAPKi therapy to forestall resistance

The Black Family – MRA Young Investigator Award

Zhentao Yang, PhD, The Regents of the University of California, Los Angeles

Engineer chemically induced stem-like T cells against melanoma
Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) – MRA Young Investigator Award
Chen Yao, PhD, The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center

Mechanisms of acral melanoma progression and metastasis
The Black Family – MRA Young Investigator Award
Dekker Deacon, MD, PhD, The University of Utah

Mapping and characterizing cellular niches in melanoma metastasis
Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) London – MRA Young Investigator Award
Panagiotis Karras, PhD, Free University of Brussels

Harnessing the lymph node as a discovery platform to target melanoma
MRA Young Investigator Award
Jessalyn Ubellacker, PhD, President and Fellows of Harvard College, Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health

Characterizing aneuploidy as a driver and vulnerability in melanoma
Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) – MRA Young Investigator Award
Jason Sheltzer, PhD, The Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University

Pilot Awardees

The MRA Pilot Awards provide early support for conceptually novel, exploratory, high risk and high impact projects with the potential to change the face of melanoma research and treatments.

Blocking extracellular HSP70 with decoy antibodies to treat melanoma
MRA Pilot Award
Natalia Freund, PhD, Tel Aviv University

Enhancing CD8+ T cell responses to melanoma brain metastases
Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) – MRA Pilot Award
Arlene Sharpe, MD, PhD, President and Fellows of Harvard College, Harvard Medical School

Deconstructing an IL33-dependent lymphatic niche in melanoma-draining lymph
Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) – MRA Pilot Award
Amanda Lund, PhD, New York University Grossman School of Medicine

Chromosome Y loss in melanoma
MRA Pilot Award
Todd Ridky, MD, PhD, University of Pennsylvania, Perelman School of Medicine

Mechanism-guided biomarkers & therapies in NRAS-mutant melanoma
MRA Pilot Award
Hee Won Yang, PhD, Columbia University Irving Medical Center

Spatial and AI-powered insights into melanocytic malignant transformation

MRA Pilot Award

Paul Harms, MD, PhD, The Regents of the University of Michigan

Team Science Awards

The MRA Team Science Awards utilize a multidisciplinary team science approach to foster collaborative research projects with the potential of rapid advancement to the clinic. This award also requires the inclusion of a Young Investigator to participate on the research team and interact with a melanoma mentor.

Accelerating in vivo TCR therapy for uveal melanoma targeting SLC45A2

The Uveal Melanoma Task Force- MRA Team Science-Academic Industry Partnership Award

Cassian Yee, MD, The University of Texas, MD Anderson Cancer Center

Oncochromosomes and TERT as foundational drivers in acral melanoma

The Black Family - MRA Team Science Award

Boris Bastian, MD, The Regents of the University of California, San Francisco

Targeting metabolism in therapy resistant and metastatic uveal melanoma

The Uveal Melanoma Task Force- MRA Team Science Award

Andrew Aplin, PhD, Thomas Jefferson University

Development of a covalent CARM1 inhibitor for immunotherapy of melanoma

MRA Team Science Award

Kai Wucherpennig, MD, PhD, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Harnessing anti-tumor CD4+ TIL to improve melanoma immunotherapy response

Mary Jo and Brian Rogers - MRA Team Science Award

Kellie Smith, PhD, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Tumor-selective RAF inhibitors for RAS- and BRAF dimer-driven melanomas

Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) - MRA Team Science Award

Poulikos Poulikakos, PhD, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai

AI prediction and analysis of chromosomal instability in melanoma relapse

Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) - MRA Team Science Award

Benjamin Izar, MD, PhD, Columbia University Irving Medical Center

Melanoma phenotypic heterogeneity driving resistance to immune therapies

MRA Team Science Award collaboratively funded by Yale University and the VIB Center for Cancer Biology

Marcus Bosenberg, MD, PhD, Yale University

Defining shared non-canonical tumor antigens for anti-melanoma vaccines

Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) – MRA Team Science Award collaboratively funded by Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Inc.

Patrick Ott, MD, PhD, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Investigating the origins of acral melanoma

Leveraged Finance Fights Melanoma (LFFM) London – MRA Team Science Award

Richard White, MD, PhD, University of Oxford

Targeting the melanoma metabolic microenvironment to boost T-cell therapy

Denise and Michael Kellen – MRA Team Science Award collaboratively funded by Weill Medical College of Cornell University

Taha Merghoub, PhD, Weill Medical College of Cornell University

More About MRA:

The Melanoma Research Alliance (MRA) is the largest private, non-profit funder of melanoma research worldwide. Founded in 2007 by Debra and Leon Black, MRA's mission is to end suffering and death due to melanoma by advancing the most promising science and research. MRA-funded investigators have been at the forefront of every major melanoma breakthrough, helping to drive the approval of more than 19 new therapeutic approaches. Through strategic investments across prevention, diagnosis, treatment, metastasis, and survivorship, MRA is transforming outcomes for patients worldwide. Thanks to the generosity of MRA's founders, 100% of all public donations support innovative melanoma research — without any overhead or administrative costs. MRA is recognized as one of the most fiscally efficient nonprofits in the country.

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<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/powering-progress-mra-announces-184-million-global-research-investment-accelerate-next-era-melanoma-breakthroughs>