

COVID-19, Versus Arthritis Research – Frequently asked questions

1. What if any resource are you allocating to COVID-19 research?

This is a live conversation within the research directorate and the charity on how best we can respond. We need to understand where we can make most impact, and welcome comments and ideas from our research community on where to focus.

We are already having conversations with researchers on how we can support them to adapt their research to support the global COVID-19 research effort, and are working with partners – Kennedy Trust, NIHR on how we can adapt our plans. As a charity we are also gathering lived experiences during COVID-19 to help direct our plans and provide support where it is needed most.

We will use our comms channels to promote what work that our researchers are doing in this area.

2. Is Versus Arthritis continuing as usual with studies unrelated to COVID-19?

Versus Arthritis will support any decision made by the host institute, to prioritise frontline care or COVID-19 studies. This means that many research studies funded by Versus Arthritis may need to be paused.

Additionally, Versus Arthritis asks that you pause the site set up of any new or ongoing studies at NHS and social care sites that are not nationally prioritised COVID-19 studies. If there are exceptional reasons why you feel this is not appropriate for your research, please contact your awards team.

Versus Arthritis will support any decision for studies to continue, provided this has no detrimental effect on patients or patient care.

3. Will applications for research that will not be affected by Covid-19 restrictions be prioritised?

Our aim is always to fund the research that will most benefit people with arthritis and which stands up to scientific and lay scrutiny. If proposed research will be affected by the Covid-19 crisis, then this should be reflected in the proposed start date and duration of the work. It will be considered in the review, but we do not feel it should impact on the overall decisions made.

4. We are delaying the start of our project. Will we lose our funding as a result?

No. Funding for the research will remain the same from the amended start date.

5. What does 'pausing' a study mean?

Ultimately, the aim of pausing a study will be to release staff time for NHS frontline care, to protect public health or because of closures within your institution. This is likely to delay the research contract end date with implications for research deliverables and for funding flows to contracted organisations. If it is not possible to continue or adapt your normal research activity, you may apply for a short-term suspension to your award. Your award will not be active for the duration of the suspension and will be reinstated and appropriately extended when you are able to initiate activity.

6. Will organisations which hold Versus Arthritis contracts and who need to pause research be penalised?

If research staff funded on awards are unable to continue research due to redeployment of staff to NHS frontline, Versus Arthritis will continue to support salaries, recognising that these will subsequently be recoverable from the employing organisation. Our expectation is that the host institution will investigate recovery of these costs from government and/or other channels. We will work in partnership with your institution on this and any requirements for supplementary funding from Versus Arthritis if this becomes necessary.

7. Coronavirus job retention scheme (CJRS)

If you have staff members whose salaries are paid by a Versus Arthritis award who are unable to carry out their work, our expectation is that the employing organisation takes steps to furlough these members of staff and seek support through the CJRS.

Furloughing of staff is a local decision to be taken by the host institution and Versus Arthritis will support decisions to furlough staff where they are not able to continue with their research activity.

To ensure parity for research staff funded by our awards with those paid directly by the institution, our position on the top up of furloughed staff salaries is to follow the policy of the institution and we will require sight of this policy to agree any request.

8. Will Versus Arthritis communicate with individual institutions to inform them of the furlough policy?

We have been in communication with some universities but not all as we want to get a clear picture of the issues award holders are facing before we do this, as different institutions may be doing different things re furloughing.

Our position is that if you have staff members whose salaries are paid by a Versus Arthritis award who are unable to carry out their work, our expectation is that the employing organisation takes steps to furlough these members of staff and seeks support through the CJRS. At the point where staff members are not able to carry out their research related work, we ask that you speak to the institution and then get in touch so we can be updated on your plans.

9. Will Versus Arthritis be accepting supplement requests?

Charities are facing enormous financial pressure as a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis and whilst we appreciate that you may be considering the long term effects of this on your own research at an early stage, we are unable to make any decisions related to supplementary funding at this time. We are working closely with AMRC, and other charities to assess and highlight to the Government the cost of Covid-19 for charities, currently estimated at £310m across the sector and we will assess the final cost to Versus Arthritis specifically, once the crisis draws to a close. For more information on impact on the sector see this AMRC infographic <https://www.amrc.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=b5a3f8b6-2674-40f1-acd9-31d52a334315>

When we are at this point, we will be working with institutions and our award holders to assess supplement needs, taking into consideration all avenues of support available. This will not automatically come from the charity as an award supplement but may be a combination of Government support, institutional partnership and reprofiling of remaining funds within the award.

10. Who needs to do what to pause a study?

An individual site of a study can be paused by the organisation hosting the research, but this should be done in discussion with the Principal/Chief Investigator and study sponsor. An entire study can be paused if all organisations hosting the study choose to pause the activity that they are responsible for. Alternatively, a sponsor can choose to pause an entire study, but they should do so in discussion with the Principal/Chief Investigator and organisations hosting the research. The Principal/Chief Investigator of a study which is wholly, or part funded by Versus Arthritis should contact their relevant Versus Arthritis awards team to inform them that a study has been paused.

11. What records need to be kept in relation to paused Versus Arthritis contracts?

This has yet to be fully determined, but for Versus Arthritis funded studies, organisations holding Versus Arthritis awards should keep:

- a record of the staff normally funded through the research contract who have been redeployed onto non-research activity or
- staff whose activity is substantially reduced on the research project

In both cases we require the duration of that redeployment/reduction (start and end dates).

- All non-research related additional costs associated with COVID-19 responses

This information may be needed to support subsequent consideration of requests to extend Versus Arthritis contract durations.

12. Will studies that are paused be restarted?

The AMRC and non-commercial funders support the prompt restart of studies so long as they are considered viable at site level. If studies are able to restart without the need for a protocol amendment or study extension, studies may proceed to assessment of other pre-conditions. They urge all studies requiring a protocol amendment to liaise with their funder on requirement to re-open studies.

The aim will be to restart paused studies and fulfil contracts. Where this might prove difficult, the relevant Versus Arthritis awards team will be able to advise on the process associated with closing a study. Studies that restart are likely to require a contract extension and again, Versus Arthritis awards team will advise on process.

13. Will Versus Arthritis provide guidance on how to decide which studies to pause, either proactively or upon request?

There are no plans currently for Versus Arthritis to provide further guidance on which studies should be paused or continued. Please refer to answer 5 above.

14. Might different organisations hosting research reach different decisions regarding continuing/pausing multi-centre studies?

Different organisations could reach different conclusions about whether to proceed with certain arms of a multi-centre study, due to local public health risk assessments and/or workforce pressures placed on frontline services. In this scenario, Chief/Lead Investigators should come to a decision with the host institute/ sponsors on whether to pause a study overall.

15. What will happen to people who have already been recruited into research/clinical trials which are being paused?

The Principal Investigator will need to discuss with the central study team and the hosting Trust R&D department how quality of care can be maintained taking account of need across the institution. The CI/PI will be expected to communicate directly with any existing participants about the decision taken and any next steps in terms of their care and the study itself.

16. I am concerned about the safety of participant(s) in a study which is paused. How do I voice this?

The Principal Investigator of the study should raise any concerns about the conduct of the central study team and the hosting Trust R&D department. The host institution should abide by the terms and conditions of contract relating to research ethics.

If you are a patient participating in a study and have concerns, you should contact the named team (this may be called the Patient Advice and Liaison Team) given as a point of contact in the information sheet given to you when you agreed to take part in the research.

17. Will Versus Arthritis provide funding for PPE when recruitment to studies is restarted?

We would consider the health and safety of staff and patients to be an institutional responsibility and local decisions need to be made as far as this goes. We do not expect to routinely provide funds to cover PPE.

18. Are any changes being made to annual reporting cycles for Versus Arthritis infrastructure?

Depending on the length of the crisis we may need to make changes to the annual reporting cycle. We will advise award holders as soon as we know that further disruption is likely.

19. I have a progress report or finance report due to be returned to Versus Arthritis award. Are deadlines being extended for return of reports given the current situation?

Where Versus Arthritis awards are being significantly impacted by COVID-19 we will not require routine monitoring reports until after the award has returned to the original contracted delivery status.

20. I have not submitted to the recent Researchfish submission window. How do I submit now?

Holders of Versus Arthritis awards with a contractual requirement to submit in the May 2020 Researchfish report round will be given a further opportunity to submit their information later this year. In the meantime, sanctions will not be applied. You may, of course, continue to enter and edit information on the outputs, outcomes and impact of your Versus Arthritis-funded research in Researchfish at any time.

21. In relation to the specific calls listed in our announcement:

**VERSUS
ARTHRITIS**

Current active calls

We are reviewing our deadlines and ability to deliver calls regularly. We are also currently considering next year's funding activity and will ensure that all decisions or changes to activity will be published on our website

- Clinical Research Fellowships

This round has already closed but the schedule for assessment has been moved on in the year. Interviews will now take place in October 2020

- Foundations Fellowships

This call will remain open. The deadline has been extended from 16 April 2020 to 17 June 2020 so interviews will now take place in November 2020

- Medical Technologies

The deadline for Medical Technologies has been extended to 30 June 2020

- Fellowship Prizes

This call will remain open. The deadline has been moved from 22 April 2020 to 01 July 2020. Winners will be announced in September 2020

Planned calls affected

- Senior Research Fellowships

This call is now open with an extended deadline of the 9 September 2020, interviews are planned for February 2021. We will update our website if this position changes

- Career Development Fellowships

This call is now open with an extended deadline of the 9 September 2020, interviews are planned for February 2021. We will update our website if this position changes

- Priming Confidence and Creativity in New Research

Release of this call will be postponed to later in the year. We will update our website if this position changes

- Portfolio Development Fund

Release of this call will be postponed to the later in the year. We will update our website if this position changes

We are still working with MRC on the Advanced Pain Discovery Platform (APDP)

Version 1.4

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