



# Guts UK Research Strategy 2026-2031

## Introduction

At Guts UK, we're setting a five-year strategy for our research that aims to improve quality of life, treatment and survival for people living with digestive conditions and symptoms. We're the national charity for people with gut conditions, and we've invested more than £18m in research over our 50-year history. We're proud of the impact we have made through our research funding – for example in developing a breath test for oesophageal cancer, exploring stem cell therapies for gut motility disorders and finding potential new treatments for pancreatitis. We've also helped support some of the brightest researchers in the field early in their careers, developing future leaders and laying the foundations for new discoveries.

But there is so much more to do. Millions of people across the UK are living with digestive conditions and they are a factor in 1 in 8 deaths in the UK. Our digestive systems have been underfunded, undervalued and misunderstood for decades. There is a serious lack of knowledge about our guts, and we are determined to change that. We have worked together with our community of people affected by digestive conditions and scientific experts to develop an ambitious new research strategy. We aim to grow our impact for people living with gut conditions through scientific research – by driving improvements in diagnosis, treatment and care.

## Overview of our strategy

### What research we will fund

We are placing the needs of people living with digestive conditions right at the heart of our new research strategy. We aim to meet these needs and increase our impact for our community by funding research with three main aims:

1. Earlier diagnosis and prevention
2. Finding innovative new treatments
3. Improving care and quality of life

Guts UK will pursue these aims by funding research across the digestive system, but with a particular focus on gut conditions which have been neglected and under-funded. It is here that we think we can make a meaningful difference.

### How we will support research

We will underpin our research programmes with the following activities, designed to ensure our funding has the greatest possible impact:

- Involving people affected by digestive conditions
- Supporting future leaders in digestive health
- Funding exciting new research ideas
- Increasing impact through partnerships



## Our strategic aims

### 1. Earlier diagnosis and prevention

People living with digestive conditions often go through a long and complicated process before they get a diagnosis for their illness. We need to find new tests to speed up and improve diagnosis and monitoring, so we can intervene earlier with tailored treatments that reduce the risk of complications. We also want to understand the causes and triggers for digestive conditions and symptoms, so we can prevent or delay them.

We will:

- Aim to make diagnosis and monitoring more effective and less invasive, by finding new tests and improving current techniques such as endoscopy.
- Learn how to differentiate digestive conditions from each other and identify subtypes of disease, so patients can receive tailored treatments.
- Understand the causes and triggers for digestive conditions, so we can prevent them from developing or slow their progression.

### 2. Finding innovative new treatments

We urgently need new treatments for people living with digestive conditions, so we can reduce serious illness and improve survival. Our focus will be on innovative treatments that take advantage of the knowledge research is revealing about our guts. We will help create treatments that target the causes of different types of digestive illness and can be personalised for the individual needs of patients.

We will:

- Find out how to target key underlying mechanisms in digestive conditions, such as interaction between the gut and brain, immune responses and bacterial imbalance.
- Help discover innovative new treatments for gut conditions, such as gene therapies, and ways of better controlling the immune system, inflammation and the microbiome.
- Develop treatments to repair damaged guts and improve survival, including surgery to prevent or manage complications, and improve urgent care for those with serious illness.

### 3. Improving care and quality of life

We want to ensure everyone living with a digestive condition has the best possible quality of life. That involves doing research to improve current treatments and models of care, to help manage symptoms and flare-ups. We want to give people better control of their conditions and understand factors that might impact their wellbeing.

We will:

- Find better ways of managing the symptoms of digestive conditions that impact everyday life.
- Help people living with digestive conditions to manage their health, by generating evidence on diet, exercise, and over-the-counter treatments.
- Support the mental health of people with digestive conditions and understand how this can affect their gut symptoms.



## **Prioritising neglected gut conditions**

Guts UK is the only UK charity to fund research into conditions affecting all parts of the digestive system. Under our new strategy, we will especially focus on neglected and underfunded digestive conditions where we feel we can make the biggest difference – such as pancreatitis, upper gastrointestinal disease, diverticular disease, irritable bowel syndrome and other disorders of gut-brain interaction. We will also continue to prioritise research into stomach and oesophageal cancer, two of the less survivable cancers of the digestive system, and into a range of gut and liver conditions in children.

## **Our underpinning activities**

### **Involving people living with digestive conditions**

All our research is centred on the needs and priorities of our community – people living with, or affected by, digestive conditions. We have collaborated with our community to develop this strategy and will continue to do so as we put it into action. We will understand what matters most to our community through priority setting partnerships and involving our dedicated 'Experts by Experience' panel in reviewing funding applications and new research initiatives. We will work hard to reach a diverse range of people living with and affected by digestive conditions, including those from under-served groups, and will support our researchers to ensure their studies meaningfully involve the community.

### **Supporting future leaders in digestive health**

At Guts UK, we are passionate about supporting the most talented researchers early in their careers so they can become the next leaders in digestive health. We want to nurture a vibrant and diverse research community. Under our strategy, we will be directing funding at researchers who are building their careers in digestive health, through student prizes, fellowships and development awards. We will support the most promising researchers from a range of backgrounds and disciplines to develop into leaders of their field and draw in talented people with expertise in areas such as data science and healthcare research.

### **Funding exciting new research ideas**

We think we can make the biggest difference for people living with digestive conditions by funding really innovative science at an early stage to help get it off the ground. We plan to focus much of our funding on small, scientifically exciting proof of concept studies. By their nature these will be high risk, but the most successful could be game-changing. Our funding will help researchers generate the data they need to win larger follow-on grants – attracting money into the field and amplifying our impact for people with gut conditions.

### **Increasing impact through partnership**

If we're going to grow our impact for people living with digestive conditions, it's vital that we work with partners to pool expertise and draw more money into gut research. We already have strong relationships with the gut research community, working in partnership with the British Society of Gastroenterology and other specialist groups, and involving many of their experts on our research committees. We next aim to grow our number of partnerships with charities and other funders – partnering with organisations that have a shared interest either in specific gut conditions or in the underlying science. Working in partnership will allow us to draw on innovations and expertise from the digestive health field and beyond, and to expand the research we are able to support on behalf of our community.