



**Hereditary Disease Foundation Launches Fund in Honor of  
Biomedical Pioneer and Huntington's Disease Researcher  
Nancy S. Wexler**

**Columbia University Scientist Named First Recipient of the Nancy S. Wexler  
Young Investigator Prize**

NEW YORK (Aug. 18, 2020) -- The Hereditary Disease Foundation today announced that it is establishing a research fund to honor Dr. Nancy S. Wexler, a world recognized leader in genetics who led an international team that in 1993 identified the gene that causes Huntington's disease, a devastating inherited neurodegenerative disorder. The fund is being launched with \$350,000 in gifts and pledges. In the last two years, the foundation has provided over \$3 million for research worldwide.

Dr. Wexler is President of the Hereditary Disease Foundation, which funds innovative research to find treatments and cures for Huntington's disease and impact other brain disorders. She recently revealed that she has been diagnosed with Huntington's disease, the illness she has spent her life studying.



**Dr. Nancy Wexler**

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The Nancy S. Wexler Discovery Fund will encourage research collaborations and the recruitment of young scientists. Each year the fund will award the Nancy S. Wexler Young Investigator Prize to a researcher whose work reflects the highest caliber of excellence, diligence and creative thinking. The fund will also support scientific collaborations, educational workshops and conferences.

“Nancy Wexler is celebrating her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday this year, and there is no more fitting way to honor her pioneering work, relentless dedication and enduring optimism than by establishing this fund in her name,” said Meghan Donaldson, CEO of the Hereditary Disease Foundation. “We thank our contributors and friends for their support of our work, moving us toward the day when families will no longer have to face the terrible challenge of Huntington’s disease.”

### **Recipient of Young Investigator Prize**

“The fund honors Nancy Wexler’s unparalleled contributions to Huntington’s disease research and her extraordinary ability to recruit young, talented scientists to the field and build research collaborations,” said Dr. Anne B. Young, Chair of the Hereditary Disease Foundation Scientific Advisory Board and Vice Chair of the HDF Board of Directors. “We are thrilled to present the first Nancy S. Wexler Young Investigator Prize to Dr. Osama Al-Dalahmah, whose brilliant work is bringing us closer to new therapies and potential cures for Huntington’s disease.”

Dr. Al-Dalahmah, neuropathology instructor in the department of pathology and cell biology at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, is being recognized for his work to discover ways of increasing the brain’s ability to protect itself from damage caused by Huntington’s disease. He is studying astrocytes — the major support cells in the brain that ensure the proper functioning of neurons — and their role in the progression of Huntington’s disease.



Dr. Osama Al-Dalahmah

“I believe that bringing astrocytes into the spotlight will open new therapeutic avenues for people with Huntington’s disease. Huntington’s disease changes astrocytes in several ways, some of which may be neuroprotective and beneficial for neurons,” said Dr. Al-Dalahmah. “Tapping into the neuroprotective potential of astrocytes in Huntington’s disease will bring us much needed hope. The Hereditary Disease Foundation – especially Dr. Nancy Wexler – makes my research possible and is the reason why I joined the ranks of Huntington’s disease researchers,” he added.

## **Searching for Treatments and Cures for a Devastating Disease**

Huntington's disease causes irreversible declines in control of mood, memory, and movement. There is currently no cure. Each child of a parent affected with Huntington's disease has a 50% risk of inheriting the same lethal affliction. The disease usually appears in the prime of life – age 30-50 – but it can strike as early as 20 or as old as 80. It is invariably fatal over 10 to 20 years. Most individuals in the late stages of the disease lose the ability to walk, talk and feed themselves, but are still aware of themselves and their families. Since Huntington's disease is caused by a single gene, it serves as a model to potentially unlock cures for other brain disorders such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and Lou Gehrig's (ALS) diseases.

## **About the Hereditary Disease Foundation**

The [Hereditary Disease Foundation](#) (HDF) was established in 1968 by Dr. Milton Wexler after his wife Leonore was diagnosed with Huntington's disease, which meant their daughters Alice and Nancy were also at risk. From 1979 to 2002, Dr. Nancy Wexler led an international team of scientists and doctors to Venezuela, which has the world's highest prevalence of the disease, to gather clinical data working with thousands of Huntington's disease patients and their families. In 1983, HDF-supported researchers discovered the neighborhood of the Huntington's disease gene using DNA markers, the first marker for any genetic disease. As a result of this discovery, a genetic test for Huntington's disease was developed. This breakthrough also helped launch the Human Genome Project. After finding the marker, the HDF formed the Gene Hunters, a collaboration of 100 international scientists who, over the next decade, pioneered many technologies for mapping and finding genes. In 1993, they identified the Huntington's disease gene. This discovery laid the foundation for all research on Huntington's disease. Today, techniques such as gene silencing and gene editing are being studied and developed, and several clinical trials in humans are now underway.

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