

Frequently asked questions about fellowships at the NIEHS

Training positions at the NIEHS:

How are postdoctoral positions structured at the NIH and NIEHS?

NIH has a number of different postdoctoral position types available. Most fellows at NIEHS are appointed as “IRTAs” or “Visiting Fellows”. The IRTA (Intramural Research Training Award) and Visiting Fellows have the same scale of pay and benefits; IRTA positions are only available to US citizens and permanent residents, while Visiting Fellow positions are available to non-US citizens. In either case, applicants for these positions may have no more than 5 years of relevant research experience beyond their most recent doctoral degree. For general information on the IRTA and Visiting Fellows programs, go to <http://www.training.nih.gov/postdoctoral/pdopps.asp>

In addition, fellows with more experience may be appointed as “Research Fellows”. These positions are less common (and less available) as they are NIH employee positions. Although Research Fellows are hired as employees, these positions are temporary and NIH employment will not continue beyond the length of this appointment (see below for information on the “5/8 Year Rule”).

Some fellows may be hired as contractors, and do not receive the same benefits as NIH fellows.

How do you obtain a position at the NIEHS?

Some PIs will advertise their openings. The advertisements can be viewed at <http://www.training.nih.gov/apps/publicForms/postdoctoral/forms/adIndex.aspx> (search for “NIEHS.”) However, not all will advertise; others may know that a fellow will be leaving soon, but they do not currently have that position open. One option for finding a position is to look through the Division of Intramural Research webpages (<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/atniehs/index.cfm>), identify a research group in which you are interested, and contact the PI directly. Their contact information can be found on their webpage. When looking at the websites, be aware that some NIH titles/designations can be confusing to those more familiar with the academic environment. Instead of “laboratories”, NIH calls individual research labs “groups”, so the PI may be called a “group leader”. Instead of “department”, NIH uses the designations “laboratories” or “branches”. These tend to be smaller than a university department. The equivalent of a department chair is called a “lab or branch chief”.

What is the typical length of time that an NIEHS postdoc spends in training?

This varies by scientific discipline; some fields of research allow for rapid publishing, while others may take years to get something published. However, NIH has strict limits on the time one may spend in a training position.

NIH uses the “5/8 Year Rule”: postdoctoral fellows may only spend 5 years in an IRTA (Intramural Research Training Award; limited to US citizens or permanent residents) or a Visiting Fellow position. Both of these positions are non-employee training positions. After 5 years, a fellow may stay for a total of 8 years in training (including time spent as an IRTA or Visiting Fellow) if they are appointed as a Research Fellow. These positions are employee positions with employee benefits; however, they are temporary positions only, and do not confer a promise of further employment with NIEHS. Beyond 8 years, a fellow may apply for openly advertised positions within NIEHS; fellows are not converted to permanent employment at the end of their training.

What type of visa will I have as a postdoc? Will I be eligible for an H-1B visa?

Visa questions are complicated, and the type of visa you will get will depend on your appointment type. NIH has a website with answers to frequently asked questions about training positions for foreign scientists:

<http://www1.od.nih.gov/oir/sourcebook/personnel-appt/disfaqs.htm>

Choosing your postdoctoral position:

How do you decide which PI's lab to join?

This is a personal decision; two guides to help you are available from the National Postdoctoral Association: “Going in with Your Eyes Open” and “Finding the “Perfect Postdoc” For You”. They give questions you should consider (and ask in your interviews) before choosing a laboratory for your postdoc. Both of these guides are downloadable from the “Graduate Student” page of the National Postdoctoral Association website (<http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/graduate-students>)

How long before the completion of your degree should you start looking for a postdoctoral position?

Again, this will be based on personal factors. Do you have to move? Do you have a spouse/significant other who needs to find employment? If you have children, will you need to find schools or placement in childcare? Factors such as these may add to the length of time you need to spend looking for a position. Generally, you should start 6-12 months before you plan to graduate so that you have sufficient time to work on your dissertation and interview. If you require a new visa or to transfer a visa, you should allow sufficient time for processing by NIEHS, NIH, other government agencies, and for travel to your new position.

Benefits:

What health benefits are available for fellows at the NIEHS?

Most fellows will be appointed as IRTA or Visiting Fellows. NIH pays for health insurance for these fellows through the Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences (FAES); information about the plan is at http://www.faes.org/health_insurance.htm. NIH will pay for individual or family coverage at no cost to the fellow. This benefit is not taxable. Optional dental coverage is available for purchase through FAES.

Are retirement benefits available to fellows?

Retirement benefits are only available to those fellows hired as "Research Fellows".

Am I eligible for the NIH Educational Loan Repayment program?

Again, this is dependent on your employment status. Most NIH fellows are in non-employee training positions and would not be eligible for this program, which is only open to employees of NIH. Research Fellows would be eligible; however, there is a minimum commitment to NIH service/employment which some Research Fellows may not be able to meet due to the 5/8 Year Rule time constraints on the length of time they may spend in a training position. For more information, go to the NIH Loan Repayment Programs homepage at <http://lrp.info.nih.gov/HomePage.aspx>. As an NIEHS postdoctoral fellow you may, however, be eligible for deferment of student loan payments while you are at the NIEHS.

Funding resources:

Will I have to apply for a grant to fund my position? Are funding mechanisms available to postdocs while at the NIEHS?

Generally, NIEHS postdoctoral positions are fully funded and are not dependent on the PI funding your position with grant money. This makes your position stable for the duration of your training. Some positions may be shared by two PIs or funded by special

mechanisms. When you apply for the position, ask about the resources the PI will use to fund your position.

If you would like experience with writing grant applications, there are ways for you to apply for grant funding. Not all granting agencies will let you use their money at a government institution, so check before you apply. NIH has compiled a non-comprehensive list of agencies that will let you use their fellowship funding at an NIH institution; this list can be found at <http://www1.od.nih.gov/oir/sourcebook/ir-communicatns/pdfellowships.htm>

In addition, NIH fellows are able to apply for the NIH K99/R00 while they are at NIEHS. This new transitional award provides funding for 1-2 years of mentored research as a postdoc, and up to 3 years of support once the fellow has obtained an independent research position. Non-US citizens are eligible to apply for this program. For more information, go to http://grants.nih.gov/grants/new_investigators/index.htm