

## **Sam Altman's Bet on Extending the Human Lifespan**

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February 2023

More and more people have been toying with artificial intelligence (AI) software such as ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI. This kind of software is able to perform tasks like writing poems and answering questions. Not to mention passing a medical school exam earlier this year. One of the main investors in OpenAI in 2015 was Sam Altman.

Global recognition of Altman increased substantially with wide use of ChatGPT, but this is only one of the irons in the fire for the 36-year-old American entrepreneur. His sizeable net worth comes from a combination of angel investments as well as his role in both Y Combinator, a technology startup accelerator, and OpenAI. Since 2005, Y Combinator has invested in an impressive list of over 3,500 startups that now have a combined valuation of nearly \$1 Trillion.<sup>1</sup> Some examples include AirBnB, Instacart, DoorDash, Twitch, Coinbase, Reddit, and Dropbox.

Apart from these involvements, Altman is investing much of his own money in the aim of achieving two incredible goals: limitless energy and extended lifespans. To the former of these goals, he has placed over \$375 million in fusion power startup Helion Energy. For the latter, it was recently disclosed that Altman has invested \$180 million in a company called Retro Biosciences.<sup>2</sup>

### **Retro Biosciences and the Race to Slow the Aging Process**

The mission of Retro Biosciences is to increase a healthy human lifespan by ten years. A lofty goal. And, Altman knows it. He calls it a “hard” startup – those requiring large investments in order to make scientific advances and master difficult technology.<sup>3</sup>

Altman's interest in this challenge was sparked by studies involving the sewing together of old and young mice so that they shared one blood system. It was determined that the old mice in these experiments appeared to be partly rejuvenated. At the time, Y Combinator looked into anti-aging solutions. By 2020, researchers at the University of California, Berkeley found that a similar effect could be achieved by replacing the plasma in old mice with salt water and albumin – thereby diluting the old blood, and the toxins in it.<sup>4</sup>

Based partly on these results, Joe Betts-LaCroix, who had been the part-time biotech partner at Y Combinator, was encouraged by Altman to found Retro Biosciences. Only recently was it disclosed that the company received Altman's investment back in 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> Y Combinator Website. Homepage. Available at: <https://www.ycombinator.com/>. Accessed on March 8, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Regalado, Antonio. “Sam Altman invested \$180 million into a company trying to delay death”. MIT Technology Review. March 8, 2023. Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/03/08/1069523/sam-altman-investment-180-million-retro-biosciences-longevity-death/>. Accessed on March 8, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Manke, Kara. Diluting blood plasma rejuvenates tissue, reverses aging in mice. Berkely News. June 15, 2020. Available at: <https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/06/15/diluting-blood-plasma-rejuvenates-tissue-reverses-aging-in-mice/>. Accessed on March 8, 2023.

It's a lot of money, but this is not at all unprecedented. Retro might even be considered the underdog in this space, with the Saudi government pledging \$1 billion in grants each year and the formation of Altos Labs with \$3 billion in funding – both with the aim of slowing the aging process.<sup>5</sup>

Little is known about the progress being made at Retro Biosciences, or its competitors for that matter. According to MIT Technology Review, “[o]ne of its projects is to test rejuvenation techniques on T cells, part of the immune system that play an important role in fighting infection and staving off cancer. These cells are especially useful because they can be removed, rejuvenated in the lab, and then returned to a patient”.<sup>6</sup>

These investments are long plays. It's hard to say if or when there may be a return. Altman seems to be focused on the nature of the company as a means to success. He says, “[t]he main thing for Retro is to be a really good bio startup, because that is a rare thing. It's combining great science and the resources of a big company with the spirit of a startup that gets things done. And that is the project for now”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Regalado, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*