

WORLD STROKE DAY – 29 OCTOBER 2009

The bad news: Approximately 60 people die every day in South Africa as a result of strokes!

The good news: A stroke is preventable and doesn't have to be a death sentence.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA together with the World Stroke Organisation is urging all South Africans to take care of their health and be aware of the symptoms of a stroke. The theme of this year's **World Stroke Day** is "Stroke – what can I do?". This question implies that everyone can do something about stroke, whether as an individual or group – you can help fight this growing pandemic.

Stroke occurs when a vessel that sends blood to the brain bursts or is clogged by a blood clot. Today's unhealthy lifestyles and various health issues such as high blood pressure, physical inactivity, smoking, alcohol overuse, contribute to the risk of stroke, which has become an international epidemic. Stroke accounts for 5.7 million deaths each year worldwide and ranks second to ischaemic heart disease as a cause of death. It is also a leading cause of serious disability, sparing no age, sex, ethnic origin, or country.

A passive attitude towards stroke is no longer acceptable: stroke can be to a large extent be prevented, and acute stroke is potentially treatable. Much can also be done for those who have suffered from a stroke and also for their families to help them all reduce with the long term consequences of the disease. By uniting, we can coordinate our efforts to raise awareness of stroke all around the world. We can change the future course that stroke is taking today by using and spreading our knowledge globally.

According to Director of Nutrition and Education at the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA, Shân Biesman-Simons, the most important thing is to recognise the early signs of stroke and get emergency help immediately. "Many stroke survivors can look back and see that there were some early warning signs," said Shân.

Knowing the signs of a stroke and seeking immediate medical help can improve the outcome of the stroke. The symptoms of stroke appear suddenly and often there is more than one symptom at the same time.

The symptoms of stroke include:

- Sudden weakness or numbness in the face, arm or leg on one side of the body
- Confusion
- Loss of speech, or trouble speaking or understanding speech
- Trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Unexplained dizziness
- Loss of balance or trouble with walking
- Severe or unusual headache
- Difficulty swallowing

When one or more of these symptoms is experienced, get immediate medical attention – medical help is most important in the first few hours. If the person becomes unconscious, call an ambulance immediately.

“Unfortunately, the problem is that most South Africans simply don’t know what the signs of stroke are. If they did, they may have been able to avoid a stroke or achieve a better recovery,” explained Shân.

How to prevent a stroke:

- *Stop smoking* – Smoking doubles your risk of a stroke because it causes the arteries to “fur up” and makes the blood more likely to clot. Giving up smoking is not easy however it is worth the effort to improve your health and live a long heart healthy life.
- *Drink sensibly* – A high alcohol intake raises your blood pressure. Binge drinking (i.e. more than 6 units in 6 hours) is particularly dangerous –all South Africans should rather drink in moderation or not at all.
- *Eat fresh foods as much as possible* – Processed and fast foods are high in salt and low in fibre which are hidden dangers. Snacking on fruit, vegetables and dried fruit is a good option. Choose low fat proteins such as fish and poultry and eat less red meat.
- *Reduce your salt* – Salt raises your blood pressure.
- *Limit the amount of fat you eat* – Everyone needs some fat in their diet however too much saturated fat can clog up your arteries and add to weight problems.
- *Watch your weight* – Being overweight is a major risk factor for high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes. These increase your risk of a stroke. A healthy well balanced diet and regular exercise will help control your weight.
- *Exercise! Exercise! Exercise!* – Regular activity helps to lower blood pressure and creates a healthy balance of blood fats and improves your body’s ability to handle insulin. Consult with your doctor when deciding on an exercise regime. Choose an activity that you enjoy and do it on a daily basis.
- *Get your blood pressure checked regularly* – The HSFSA offers free blood pressure checks to members of the public, so make sure that you know your number.
- *Handle stress and depression* – Stress and depression take an emotional and physical toll on your body! If not handled, they can contribute to long term health problems, so take care of your wellbeing and do not stress.

In the process of recovery, medical and emotional support is crucial. If you have experienced a stroke, you need to join a Stroke Support Group in your area. The HSFSA can direct you to the support group closest to you. Visit <http://www.heartfoundation.co.za/stroke/stroke.htm> for more information.

For nutritional information call the **Heart Mark Diet Line** on **0860 223 222**.

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The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa is a community-based organisation established to reduce the incidence of heart disease and stroke in the population of South Africa by providing education and supporting vital research. For further information visit www.heartfoundation.co.za