



World Stroke Day - Ensuring that not one minute is missed #precioustime

Stroke is a condition where the blood supply to part of the brain is disrupted, resulting in oxygen starvation, brain damage and loss of function. It is most frequently caused by a clot in an artery supplying blood to the brain, a situation known as ischemia. It can also be caused by haemorrhage when a burst vessel causes blood to leak into the brain causing that part of the brain to die.

Annually, **World Stroke Day** is observed on 29 October to raise awareness about the symptoms of a stroke, to reduce the incidence of stroke, and ultimately to prevent stroke. Driven by the World Stroke Organization (WSO), the focus this year is on the importance of medical intervention in cases where a stroke event is suspected. The theme, therefore, for 2021 is, *“Minutes Can Save Lives”*. The theme will underpin the education of individuals and communities that every second that goes by is crucial when you suspect a stroke as the negative impact on brain functioning is extensive if a stroke is not treated timeously. Brain tissues, millions of neurons and billions of synapses begin to fade during a stroke. The **#Precioustime** campaign, driven by the WSO and its members of which the **Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA)** forms a part, aims to raise awareness of stroke signs and the benefits of timely access to emergency medical care. **FAST** access to treatment saves lives and improves recovery. If you spot the signs of stroke, call an ambulance immediately.

Globally, over 13 million people will have a stroke each year and around 5.5 million people will die as a result. The impact of stroke can be both short- and long-term, depending on which part of the brain is affected and how quickly it is treated. Being the main contributor to long-term disability, projections show more than 200 million disability-adjusted life-years lost globally in 2030. Stroke survivors can experience wide-ranging disabilities including difficulties with mobility and speech, paralysis on one or both sides of the body, vision problems, difficulties with swallowing and eating, memory problems as well as how they think and feel.

Stroke disproportionately affects individuals living in resource-poor countries. From 2000 to 2008, the overall stroke incidence rates in low- to middle-income countries exceeded that of incidence rates seen in high-income countries by 20%. Today, two out of every three people who suffer from a stroke live in low- and middle-income countries. In South Africa alone, 10 people suffer a stroke every hour.

According to the World Stroke Organisation, stroke incidents in young adults comprises 10% to 15 % of all stroke patients. However, compared with stroke in older adults, strokes in young adults have a disproportionately large economic impact by leaving victims disabled before their most productive years. Therefore, primary prevention is very important with regards to strokes in young adults and treatment of risk factors for stroke such as hypertension, smoking and dyslipidemia is essential.

Professor Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the HSFA, highlights the fact that stroke is a medical emergency. She states that “Every day, up to 360 South Africans are affected by stroke. About a third of those who suffer a stroke will die, and a quarter will be left with a life-changing disability”. Although a stroke is a complex medical incident, there are ways to significantly reduce its impact. Recognising the signs of a stroke early, treating it as a medical emergency and having access to the best professional care, can substantially improve outcomes.

Warning signs of a stroke are sudden and knowing how to recognise the signs of a stroke is an important first step in getting the affected person treatment. An important **ACRONYM** for stroke symptoms to remember is **FAST**:

Face: Is one side of the face droopy? - smile/show your teeth

Arms: is one side weak? - Raise both arms for 10 seconds

Speech: Is the person able to speak? Are the words slurred? - Repeat any simple sentence

Time: If even one of these signs is present, act quickly and call emergency services.” *Minutes can save lives”*

At the HSFA, our work focuses on stroke prevention as it is important to address the controllable and uncontrollable risk factors for stroke. Some risk factors are out of your control but can still increase one’s risk of heart disease and strokes.

Well-known unmodifiable risk factors include:

Age – strokes are more likely among older persons

Sex – There is a higher risk for menopausal and post-menopausal women

Genetic – inherited high cholesterol, blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythm or clotting disorders can increase the risk of strokes.

Family history – if close blood relatives have suffered a stroke, this increases an individuals’ risk of stroke

Modifiable risk factors increase your risk of stroke that you have the power to change as it is often due to unhealthy behaviours. Up to 80% of strokes can be prevented by your life choices and habits such as eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, not smoking, and managing stress effectively. Not only are lifestyle changes important to prevent the first stroke, but can also greatly reduce the risk of another stroke in stroke survivors.

As part of our mission, the **HSFSA** works towards halting the rise of premature deaths through cardiovascular disease (CVD) and cerebrovascular disease in South Africa, promoting the adoption of healthy behaviours. We do this through the provision of information, tools and support to build healthy communities. We advocate at all levels to minimise South Africans' risk of developing heart disease and stroke.