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SOUTH AFRICA



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Press Release

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The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA is not sweetening the deal during Sugar Awareness Week 2025

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) is joining the global call to action on sugar reduction during World Sugar Awareness Week, from 17 to 23 November, using the theme “**Cut Through the Sweet Talk: What You See Isn’t What You Eat.**” This annual campaign, led globally by World Action on Salt, Sugar and Health (WASSH), aims to raise awareness about the hidden sugars in everyday foods and to challenge the marketing and packaging tactics that make products appear healthier than they truly are. It encourages South Africans to look beyond labels and ask the important question — *are products really as healthy as they seem?* By helping consumers see through these claims, the initiative empowers people to make more informed choices and take control of their health. It also highlights that it is crucial for the government to strengthen regulations that enforce stricter labeling and responsible marketing by big food companies. Clear and accurate labeling helps consumers make informed choices, while responsible marketing practices can reduce the promotion of unhealthy products, especially to children.

Recent statistics published by WASSH, reveal that nine in ten children and four in five adults are consuming more sugar than recommended. This excessive intake increases the risk of serious and lifelong health conditions such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and tooth decay. Sugary drinks remain the largest source of free sugars in the diets of both children and adults. Research shows that adults who drink just one sugary beverage a day are 27% more likely to be overweight, while children face a 55% greater risk. Regular consumption of sugary drinks also raises the risk of developing diabetes by at least 24% and increases the likelihood of heart-related death by 29%

The 2023 National Food and Nutrition Security Survey (NFNSS) paints an equally alarming picture in South Africa: 57.4% of adults are overweight (25.3%) or obese (32.1%), with women disproportionately affected at 67.9%, while men show a concerning rise to 38.2%. Children and adolescents are increasingly affected too: overweight prevalence among children under five has increased from 13% in 2016 to 22.6% in 2023, and over 31% of girls aged 15 to 19 are now overweight or obese. These alarming figures underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions, particularly among children and adolescents, to curb the rising tide of obesity and its associated health risks. HSFSA data indicates that out of 4.51k people questioned, 2.01k had impaired glucose and 0.59k had diabetes. Eating too much sugar can set off a chain that ends in type 2 diabetes and heart disease. First, a high-sugar diet spikes blood glucose, forcing the pancreas to pump out a lot of insulin. Over time, cells become resistant to insulin, so glucose stays high. To keep up, the pancreas works harder and eventually can’t produce enough insulin, leading to type 2 diabetes. Meanwhile, excess sugar is turned into fat, raising triglycerides and bad LDL cholesterol while lowering good HDL cholesterol. High glucose also damages blood-vessel walls, causing inflammation and plaque buildup (atherosclerosis). This narrows arteries and can trigger heart attacks, strokes, or other cardiovascular problems.

Prof Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa reminds us that diabetes is one of the key risk factors for heart disease and strokes. In particular, diabetes is strongly associated with heart failure.

Not all sugars are created equal. Free sugars are those added to foods and drinks during processing or preparation, including table sugar, syrups, and fruit juice concentrates. Natural sugars, on the other hand, are found in whole, unprocessed foods like fruits, vegetables, and dairy products and come with nutrients such as fibre, vitamins, and minerals. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that free sugars make up less than 10% of total daily energy intake for adults and children, and ideally below 5% for even greater health benefits — the equivalent of about six teaspoons per day for men and adolescents (14–18 years) and five teaspoons for women and children (5–13 years).

To help consumers make informed choices, the HSFSA encourages everyone to read food labels carefully. Sugar can appear under many names, including corn syrup, dextrose, sucrose, honey, and fruit juice concentrate. Products containing more than 15g of sugar per 100g are considered high in sugar, while those with less than 5g per 100g are low. Choosing foods that carry the Heart Mark logo is another simple way to identify products that meet strict health standards and are lower in sugar. A common misconception is that honey is a healthier alternative to refined sugar. In reality, honey is still a concentrated form of sugar and can have the same negative effects on blood sugar levels, weight, and overall health when consumed in excess. The key is moderation and awareness.

Small, consistent changes to daily habits can significantly reduce sugar intake. Start by halving the amount of sugar added to tea, coffee, or cereal, and gradually reduce it further over time. Replace sugary toppings and desserts with fresh fruit, and opt for water or unsweetened beverages instead of soft drinks. Many sauces and condiments, such as ketchup and sweet chilli sauce, contain surprisingly high levels of sugar — up to 70% in some cases. Choosing low-sugar alternatives or making your own simple dressings using olive oil, vinegar, and herbs can help cut back on hidden sugars.

To further support public education on sugar awareness, the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa, in partnership with Pharma Dynamics, has developed the *Sugar Chart Booklet*. This easy-to-use resource provides clear, evidence-based information about the impact of excessive sugar intake. It highlights that sugar is high in calories and can contribute to weight gain, increasing the risk of obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. The booklet features simple sugar facts, practical tips for reducing sugar intake, and visual charts that help consumers identify hidden sugars in everyday foods and beverages. It serves as a practical guide for anyone looking to make healthier, more informed dietary choices. You may access this on our website: www.heartfoundation.co.za.

Beyond individual choices, the HSFSA is calling for stronger national nutrition policies to support healthier food environments. Measures such as increasing the sugar tax, funding nutrition education, and subsidising healthy foods can make nutritious options more affordable, particularly for low-income households. These interventions not only reduce the burden of diet-related diseases but also promote health equity, ensuring everyone — including this age group of children and adolescents — has access to nutritious, affordable food.

“Creating a healthier South Africa starts with transparency — in our food labels, our marketing, and our policies,” says Prof Pamela Naidoo, CEO at the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa. “By cutting through the sweet talk, we can empower South Africans, including this age group, to make informed choices that protect their health and the health of future generations.”

Interviews will be conducted with our CEO, Professor Pamela Naidoo, Health Promotions & Health Risk Assessment Programme Team, and Dietitians. To co-ordinate and confirm interview dates you are welcome to contact Mr. Themba Mzondi, our PR and Communications Officer on 021 422 1586 / 078 113 5216 or email themba.mzondi@heartfoundation.co.za

About the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) plays a leading role in the fight against preventable heart disease and stroke, with the aim of seeing fewer people in South Africa suffer premature deaths and disabilities. The HSFSA, established in 1980 is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation which relies on external funding to sustain the work it carries out.

The HSFSA aims to reduce the cardiovascular disease (CVD) burden in South Africa and ultimately on the health care system of South Africa. Our mission is to empower people in South Africa to adopt healthy lifestyles, make healthy choices easier, seek appropriate care and encourage prevention.

For more information visit www.heartfoundation.co.za. You can also find us on www.facebook.com/HeartStrokeSA, www.twitter.com/SAHeartStroke and www.instagram.com/heartstrokesa

