



Press Release

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World Health Day 2026: Together for Health. Stand with Science

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) remains one of the leading causes of death globally, accounting for an estimated 19.8 million deaths in 2022, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). This growing burden highlights the critical importance of scientific research in understanding the behavioural, biological, commercial and environmental determinants of CVD. Within this framework, it is important to develop effective, evidence-based prevention and treatment strategies. Scientific evidence points to the fact that many CV conditions are preventable through early detection, behaviour modification, and health management. However, putting this knowledge into practice is a major challenge, especially in South Africa, where resources are limited and access to care is not equitable.

As a way to highlight the importance of health matters, each year on 7 April, is World Health Day, a global health campaign initiated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the late forties. The day highlights the current barriers faced by the global population and emphasises the role individuals, scientists and communities can play in removing these barriers for better health outcomes. **The World Health Day theme this year underscores the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa's (HSFSA) mission for the reduction of cardiovascular disease burden in South Africa.**

The 2026 theme, **"Together for Health. Stand Up for Science,"** highlights the significant role science plays in protecting the health of people, animals, plants, and the planet. The campaign calls for evidence-based best practices (EBBPs) and approaches to health solutions and care, while also advocating for stronger support for science and public health initiatives. Research shows that the use of evidence-based interventions, rooted in science, is associated with better patient outcomes, including lower mortality rates and improved recovery. When treatments are guided by scientific evidence, healthcare systems can avoid using ineffective or unnecessary interventions. Public health interventions informed by scientific evidence can improve health outcomes across entire populations, rather than benefiting only individual patients. Additionally, this theme also serves as a call to recognise and value the important contributions of scientists, researchers, healthcare professionals and public health organisations who drive progress in disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment. Their role in generating credible evidence, guiding policy, and responding to emerging health challenges is essential to improving population health outcomes and building resilient health systems. Continued investment in and recognition of this expertise is essential to accelerate progress and improve heart and brain health at both population and individual levels.

Research indicates that evidence-based health literacy and prevention programmes can positively influence mental health and health-related behaviours, including physical activity, diet, and sleep. In addition, strategies grounded in scientific evidence for the prevention and management of chronic diseases, including CVD, can strengthen access to effective interventions within primary healthcare systems. Applying EBBPs at the HSFSAs ensures that health promotion programmes, advocacy initiatives, and public education efforts are grounded in the science that demonstrates the best outcomes. While CVD remains the leading cause of death worldwide, 80% of these deaths are preventable. Research has consistently shown that there are effective drug and surgical treatments, as well as simple behaviour change that can significantly reduce the risk of heart disease, strokes and the associated risk factors.

Risk factors for CVD include modifiable and unmodifiable risk factors. Tobacco use remains a leading contributor to CVD, with research proving its direct impact on vascular damage and heart disease. Physical inactivity is another major risk factor, with global studies consistently showing that physical inactivity increases the risk of heart disease and stroke by more than 50%. Excessive use of alcohol, chronic stress, and poor sleep have also been increasingly recognised in the scientific literature as important contributors to cardiovascular risk. In addition, metabolic risk factors such as raised blood pressure, blood glucose, abnormal blood lipids, and obesity are strongly associated with cardiovascular outcomes, and are often driven by a combination of behavioural, environmental, and genetic factors. EBBPs help identify effective strategies for preventing and managing CVD, which include promoting healthy eating, increasing physical activity, reducing tobacco use, and improving early detection of risk factors such as hypertension, cholesterol and diabetes. By using scientifically validated interventions, healthcare workers can work with patients and communities to improve population health outcomes and contribute to reducing the burden of CVD in South Africa.

The HSFSAs CEO and health care practitioners ask the public to be guarded against the growing spread of health misinformation, disinformation and confusion around nutrition and medical guidance that poses a significant threat to public health, causing people to disregard proven medical interventions. The CEO, Prof Pamela Naidoo whose career has been based on evidence, states that “throughout the life course we should make health decisions based on credible scientific evidence” By following this principle thousands of premature deaths from heart disease and strokes can be prevented. The HSFSAs implements several programmes based on what the evidence shows. These programmes include the Nutrition Science Programme, Health Promotion and Health Risk Assessment Programme, and health literacy efforts through the media and public engagement. One practical way the public can assist the HSFSAs in reducing CVD through EBP is by adopting healthy behaviours that are supported by scientific evidence and encouraging others to do the same. These include:

- Following heart and brain-healthy behaviours such as eating a balanced diet, limiting salt, saturated fat and sugar, engaging in regular physical activity, avoiding tobacco, vaping and alcohol, and managing stress.

- Participating in health screening and prevention programmes recommended by HSFSA, such as blood pressure, blood glucose, cholesterol checks, body mass index (BMI) and waist circumference.
- Sharing evidence-based health information from the Foundation through social media, community events, or personal networks to promote awareness and preventive behaviours.

Through its programmes, community outreach, public education initiatives, CVD updates newsletters distributed to healthcare professionals and research, the HSFSA continues to lead the way in promoting science-based interventions. Every individual's commitment to evidence-based health behaviours, whether through diet, exercise, health screening, or sharing reliable information, strengthens these efforts and brings us closer to a healthier, CVD-free South Africa.

Interviews will be conducted with our CEO, Prof Pamela Naidoo and our Healthcare Professional Teams. To coordinate 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 organization 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.x.com/SAHeartStroke and www.instagram.com/heartstrokesa

