



THE HEART
AND STROKE
FOUNDATION
SOUTH AFRICA



**World
Hypertension
Day**



APPROVED AS PART OF
THE HEART AND STROKE
FOUNDATION SOUTH AFRICA

Press Release

12 May 2026

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA gearing up to commemorate World Hypertension Day 2026

On **World Hypertension Day 2026**, the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) is calling for a shift in how we understand hypertension — commonly referred to as high blood pressure. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. “High blood pressure” is a general descriptive term indicating that a person’s blood pressure is above the normal range at a given time. According to the American Heart Association, normal blood pressure is defined as systolic <120 mm Hg and diastolic <80 mm Hg; elevated blood pressure as systolic 120–129 mm Hg with diastolic <80 mm Hg; stage 1 hypertension as systolic 130–139 mm Hg or diastolic 80–89 mm Hg; and stage 2 hypertension as systolic \geq 140 mm Hg or diastolic \geq 90 mm Hg. However, “high blood pressure” alone is not a clinical diagnosis, as blood pressure may be temporarily elevated due to factors such as stress, physical activity, diet, or underlying medical conditions.

“Hypertension” is the clinical diagnosis made by healthcare professionals when blood pressure readings are consistently elevated, typically confirmed through multiple measurements taken on separate occasions at or above 140/90 mmHg in clinical settings. This approach aligns with guidance from bodies such as the International Society of Hypertension, the World Health Organisation, and South Africa’s own National Department of Health through the Standard Treatment Guidelines and Essential Medicines List (STG/EDL). This distinction is important because many people who are told during a single screening that they have “high blood pressure” may mistakenly assume they have a diagnosis of hypertension, while others may not recognise that “hypertension” refers to a confirmed, ongoing medical diagnosis with long-term health risks. Hypertension can be understood as a condition reflecting sustained strain on the body’s vascular system, which over time increases the risk of heart disease and stroke. Clear communication helps prevent confusion, supports accurate understanding, and encourages appropriate follow-up care. The CEO, Prof Pamela Naidoo has emphasized the importance of the public receiving in-depth knowledge about hypertension as it leads to greater empowerment, health-seeking behaviour and self-management.

The Foundation is therefore advocating for the use of clear, accessible language to ensure that the public recognises the condition, understand its risks, and seek proper assessment. By emphasising that a diagnosis of hypertension requires repeated measurements and medical evaluation, we can promote both awareness and responsible health-seeking behaviour.

High blood pressure and hypertension is a major contributor to heart disease and strokes in South Africa, yet despite its negative health impact, it remains underdiagnosed. It is underdiagnosed not only because people may not experience clear warning signs or because blood pressure is not being checked, but also because people do not present at health centres, and it is often not detected early. In some cases, blood pressure is too often misclassified or dismissed as “normal” when it is already elevated. This is not simply a knowledge gap; it is a systems and measurement challenge that delays timely intervention. Strengthening accurate diagnosis and ensuring that healthcare workers consistently apply established, evidence-based treatment guidelines are among the most effective steps we can take to reduce South Africa’s burden of preventable heart disease and stroke. The fact that hypertension is a “silent killer” is very real.

This year’s global theme, “**Controlling Hypertension Together!**”, is led by the World Hypertension League, and closely aligns with South Africa’s call to strengthen early detection and medical intervention. The theme highlights the importance of accurate blood pressure measurement, community awareness, and collective action, particularly in low- and middle-income settings where the burden of disease is highest. According to the World Health Organisation, an estimated 1.4 billion adults aged 30–79 years are living with hypertension globally, with about two-thirds residing in low- and middle-income countries in 2024. These priorities

reinforce the Foundation's focus: recognising hypertension early, understanding the dangers, and acting decisively to prevent medical complications. These global trends are reflected locally in South Africa, where the burden of hypertension remains high.

Data from the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa further highlights the scale of the challenge. In a health risk assessment of 4 510 participants collected since 2023 until end-March 2026, 1 570 were found to have elevated blood pressure, indicating that at least a third of participants are already at risk for developing CVD. The urgency of improving detection and management is clear. It is estimated that nearly one in three adults in South Africa lives with hypertension, yet approximately 50% of South Africans remain undiagnosed. Globally, the World Health Organisation reports that over 1.2 billion people are affected by hypertension, with fewer than half receiving appropriate treatment and only a fraction achieving adequate control, partially due to lack of adherence to treatment protocols.

Understanding the data also requires looking beyond measurement and diagnosis to the underlying biological and environmental drivers of hypertension. Research in physiology and cardiovascular medicine shows that hypertension does not develop in isolation. Stress, especially when chronic, activates the body's nervous and hormonal systems, including the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, leading to sustained increases in blood pressure. Over time, this affects far more than the heart. Chronic stress disrupts the brain, immune system, and metabolic processes, reinforcing the understanding of hypertension as a system-wide condition rather than a single-organ problem. Increasingly, psychosocial and environmental stressors, such as economic strain, urbanisation, and limited access to healthcare, are recognised as significant contributors to rising hypertension rates globally and in South Africa.

These biological and environmental pathways are further reflected in population-level patterns of disease and risk behaviour. Hypertension is not only driven by genetics but is strongly influenced by everyday behavioural choices, with modifiable risk factors such as obesity, high salt intake, physical inactivity, tobacco use and vaping, excessive alcohol use, and diets low in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains increasing both the likelihood of developing the condition and the risk of complications such as stroke, heart attack, and kidney disease.

Dietary salt intake is a key modifiable factor that influences blood pressure, as high sodium consumption contributes to fluid retention and increased vascular pressure over time. Analysis of HSFSa data by risk profile found 70% of individuals with a high risk for developing CVD had a self-reported normal salt intake, with only 10% reporting a high intake. The medium-risk group reported the highest proportion of high salt intake at 12.4%. This may indicate that people in the high-risk group had previously received dietary education, whereas those in the medium-risk group had not. Medium-risk groups are often overlooked in prevention efforts, revealing a gap where unhealthy habits persist before people are diagnosed. HSFSa is urging earlier dietary education and community screening to act before hypertension, heart disease and stroke develop.

Diagnosis and management should not be based on blood pressure readings alone. Sister Juandre Watson, Health Promotion and Health Risk Assessment Team Lead at the HSFSa, notes that while the importance of diagnosing and managing hypertension is well understood, the realities of clinical practice cannot be overlooked. "In many healthcare settings, particularly in resource-constrained environments, time pressures and high patient volumes can make it challenging to consistently apply best-practice screening and follow-up. These constraints can contribute to missed opportunities, whether it's an elevated reading that isn't fully assessed or a patient who doesn't receive timely intervention. However, these brief clinical moments are incredibly valuable. When blood pressure is measured accurately, interpreted correctly, and managed in line with guidelines, it has a meaningful impact, not only for the individual patient but for the healthcare system as a whole. Early and appropriate care can significantly reduce the long-term burden of CVD and stroke, easing pressure on already stretched services."

Addressing challenges related to prevention, early diagnosis, and effective management of hypertension requires a coordinated effort. The HSFSa emphasises that improving outcomes depends on getting the basics

right: measuring blood pressure accurately, recognising elevated readings early, and consistently applying evidence-based treatment guidelines. By doing so, together with strengthened public awareness and community-level action, South Africa can make meaningful progress in reducing the preventable burden of heart disease and stroke.

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

