

Press Release

19 June 2026

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa is gearing up to commemorate Employee Wellness Week, 1 - 7 July 2026

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) will commemorate Employee Wellness Week (EWW) from 1st to 7th July 2026 to promote employee wellbeing and reduce the burden of heart disease and strokes. The timing of the campaign remains important as cardiovascular disease (CVD) remains the leading cause of death and disability in South Africa and globally. According to the World Health Organisation, CVDs accounted for approximately 32% of all deaths in 2022, 19.8 million lives lost, with 85% due to heart attacks and strokes. The impact is most severe in low- and middle-income countries. South Africa, is a middle-income country where heart disease and strokes disproportionately affect people of employable age. With 16.7 million South Africans employed and spending most of their day at work, the HSFSA says every office, factory and site is the frontline for heart disease and stroke prevention.

Rising healthcare costs make prevention urgent. Medicine prices, specialist fees and hospital bills are climbing faster than inflation, putting medical schemes and patients paying out-of-pocket under severe strain. Once chronic disease sets in, costs multiply, many of which could be avoided. Workplace wellness initiatives provide workspaces a practical way to tackle these cost drivers through early screening and adoption of healthier behaviours before medical conditions arise. "Healthy employees mean better business outcomes and better quality of life," says Prof. Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the HSFSA. Workplace wellness programmes don't just improve cardiovascular risk profiles; they lower psychological stress, increase job satisfaction, and reduce absenteeism. Investing in prevention now costs far less than treating heart attacks, strokes and chronic illness later.

A local study of 87 workers in Johannesburg found that just a few extra minutes of vigorous activity (like brisk walking or stair climbing) each day can lower your chances of taking sick leave by 12%. Employees with higher rates of absenteeism tended to have greater cardiovascular risk factors, larger waist sizes, and higher BMIs. The research suggests that incorporating small amounts of physical activity into daily routines can improve overall health and productivity.

International researchers also looked at 121 studies on workplace wellness programs to see what works. They found that even modest workplace programs can deliver real improvements in employee health and business outcomes. The study found small but

consistent gains: fruit and vegetable intake increased, fat intake decreased, and employees saw average reductions in BMI, body weight, and waist circumference. Blood pressure and cholesterol markers also improved, directly reducing CVD risk. Because CVD is a leading driver of absenteeism and lost productivity, these small health gains translate into healthier, more engaged teams and lower costs for employers. The findings reinforce that workplace wellness isn't about quick fixes, but about creating environments and habits that support long-term heart- and brain health and a stronger workforce.

In line with our vision to prevent CVD and promote healthy behaviours, the HSFSa can help your employees understand that being healthy isn't about a diet, but about long-term day-to-day habits. Our team of professionals, nurses and dietitians provides health risk assessments, health education and counselling, practical guidance on including physical activity into busy workdays, stress management strategies to reduce pressure and build resilience, and advice on creating a healthy work environment that supports productivity. These services deliver clear benefits for employers, including lower CVD risk, improved morale and reduced medical costs, because we address individual behaviour and workplace conditions together. **Contact the HSFSa today on 021 422 1586** to learn how we can tailor a workplace wellness program to your team's needs.

While employers create the environment, daily choices still sit with each of us. The HSFSa encourages employees to take ownership of 6 key habits that protect heart and brain health during the workday:

1. Eat and plate with purpose — Wholegrains, fruit, vegetables, lean meat and plant proteins like beans and lentils are your best defence against heart disease and stroke. Cut back on sugar, salt and fat from things like fizzy drinks, boerewors and processed snacks. When packing lunch or using the staff canteen, use smaller plates and the plate model: $\frac{1}{4}$ starchy whole grain foods, $\frac{1}{4}$ lean protein, $\frac{1}{2}$ vegetables and salad. Choose Heart Mark products when shopping. Look for the red circle logo with a white heart, fork and knife — it indicates foods lower in salt, saturated fat, trans fat and sugar, and higher in fibre. Using Heart Mark makes it simple to build meals that support heart and brain health for you and your family. Please visit our website to download free healthy recipes from HSFSa's Cooking from the Heart recipe books at www.heartfoundation.co.za.
2. Move more, stress less — Physical activity improves heart and brain health, and lowers stress. Take the stairs instead of the lift and add a 10-minute lunch walk if your job is sedentary. Those small bursts add up to the 150 minutes of weekly exercise adults need, while also helping you refocus.
3. Snack and sip smart — Choose fruit, unsweetened yoghurt, unsalted nuts or fresh veggies instead of ultra-processed snacks like chips, baked goods and chocolates. Keep a water bottle at your desk and aim for 8 glasses a day. Ask your employer for a water cooler. Staying hydrated is easier when water is within reach.
4. Protect your sleep and mood — Adults need 7+ hours of good quality sleep per night for optimal health, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society. During the day, build connections through team outings and share

a laugh with colleagues. Strong relationships and laughter are proven stress relievers for mental and emotional well-being.

5. Make health the default — Individual action works best when the workplace supports it. Encourage healthier vending options and heart-brain healthy meetings with fruit and veggie platters instead of biscuits and sugary drinks.
6. Know your numbers with regular screening — Get your blood pressure (BP), blood glucose, cholesterol and BMI checked at least once a year. High BP often has no symptoms, so screening regularly identifies risk early before heart attacks or strokes happen.

Heart disease and stroke are largely preventable, but only if we act before diagnosis. EWW is the HSFSA's call to action for South African workplaces to step up now. EWW goes beyond the workplace into the personal as it adopts a holistic view of overall well-being. Employees get a chance to embed heart and brain-healthy behaviours into daily routines. For employees, it's about making small daily choices that protect the heart and brain. Together, these actions reduce heart disease and strokes, ease the human and financial toll of CVD, and help build a healthier, more productive workforce for the future. The HSFSA provides workplace wellness packages. Please contact us for more information.

Interviews will be conducted with our Health Promotions and Health Risk Assessment Programme Team, Dietitians and CEO, Professor Pamela Naidoo. To coordinate and confirm interview dates, you are welcome to contact Themba Mzondi, our PR and Communications Officer, on 021 422 1586 / 0781135216 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.twitter.com/SAHeartStroke and www.instagram.com/heartstrokesa

