



Press Release

10 September 2026

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA to commemorate World Heart Day

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) will join the World Heart Federation (WHF) and fellow members to commemorate **World Heart Day (WHD) on 29 September 2026**. This day is the culmination of Heart Awareness Month (HAM), which focuses on local and global efforts to raise awareness of the burden of cardiovascular disease (CVD). The HSFSA aligns with the 2026 global theme: ***Heart Disease Can Hide in Plain Sight: Don't Miss a Beat***. Over 26 years, WHD has united communities around the world to make heart health a priority. In 2026, the campaign spotlights CVD with high death rates and claims around 1 in 3 lives, which is more than any other medical condition. Many symptoms are missed, and the reduction of the burden of CVD has made too little progress. In South Africa, this danger is, literally, hiding in plain sight.

This WHD, the HSFSA wants every South African to know their body anatomy. In particular, they must know the structure of the heart and its location in the chest. In South Africa, where uncontrolled hypertension, late diagnosis and inequitable access to care mean that CVD “often hides in plain sight”, the “Don't Miss a Beat” campaign is an urgent call to action. The HSFSA data show that over 1 in 3 people have raised blood pressure even though most believe their salt intake is “normal,” and this silent, symptomless hypertension is driving heart attacks and strokes. Consuming more than 5g of salt daily may lead to raised BP and hypertension. Prof Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the HSFSA, raises the fact that we need to think beyond the obvious, as new risk factors for CVD are also an important consideration. Factors such as pollution and lack of resources are also “silent” drivers of CVD. Those in low-resource settings are disproportionately affected.

The cardiovascular system is a network of the heart, blood vessels and blood. The heart is a cone-shaped muscular organ in the chest that continuously pumps blood throughout the body, delivering oxygen and nutrients to organs and tissues while carrying away waste products. It has four chambers and four valves that work together to keep blood flowing in the right direction. The heart also has its own blood supply through the coronary arteries, which provide the heart muscle with oxygen and nutrients.

Further, the heart has an internal electrical system that controls the rate and rhythm of each heartbeat. The electrical signal starts in the sinoatrial, or SA, node – the heart’s natural pacemaker – and travels through the heart to coordinate each contraction. When this electrical system is disrupted, abnormal heart rhythms, known as arrhythmias, can occur. Problems affecting the heart muscle, valves or coronary arteries can also lead to different forms of heart disease.

Heart disease does not always announce itself. It can develop silently in the heart or blood vessels, and symptoms may not always be obvious. **It can hide from birth, with 50% of babies born with congenital heart disease not diagnosed at birth, and in women, whose symptoms like jaw pain, nausea and unusual fatigue are often missed.** Heart disease and stroke are among the leading causes of death worldwide, yet many cardiovascular events can be prevented by addressing risk factors that can be reduced through behaviour modification. Having a risk factor does not necessarily mean that you will develop CVD. However, the higher the risk measure a person has, the greater the likelihood

of them developing CVD. While factors such as age and family history cannot be changed, taking action through healthier behavioural choices, early detection and appropriate treatment can help prevent risk factors from compromising heart health and significantly reduce the risk of CVD. Turning awareness into action means recognising hidden symptoms, knowing your body and your numbers, eating healthily with less salt, and demanding stronger health systems — because despite CVD being the world's leading cause of death, fewer than 20 countries have a standalone plan to tackle it and 4 in 5 people with hypertension remain uncontrolled.

Throughout September, the HSFSa used HAM to remind South Africans that heart disease can often hide in plain sight. Each week focused on an important area of heart health, including hypertension, coronary heart disease, heart failure and heart rhythm disorders (arrhythmia). The discussions highlighted the significant burden of these conditions. Hypertension affects an estimated 27% to 58% of South Africans, while coronary heart disease caused 32,739 deaths in South Africa in 2020, accounting for 7.2% of all deaths. Heart rhythm disorders, including atrial fibrillation, are also an important concern, affecting around one in five people with heart failure and one in ten people with rheumatic heart disease in sub-Saharan Africa. “HAM and WHD have reminded us that CVD can develop quietly, but there are steps we can all take to reduce our risk,” says Prof Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the HSFSa. “Knowing your risk, checking your blood pressure and other health indicators, recognising warning signs and seeking care early can make a real difference. Looking after your heart is not just for September – it is something we should do throughout the year.”

This WHD, the HSFSa will be partnering with various organisations across the country, including Life Healthcare Group, Suncoast Casino, Pavilion Shopping Centre and Oceans Mall Umhlanga, among others in illuminating their buildings and monuments in red to support the campaign and raise awareness about the burden of CVD.

WHD also reminds us that a heart-healthy life starts with everyday choices. Eating healthy food well, staying active, avoiding tobacco, vapes and nicotine, limiting alcohol, knowing your numbers and staying on prescribed treatment can all help reduce cardiovascular risk. Regular health checks can also help identify risk factors early, when there is an opportunity to take action. The World Health Organisation estimates that 31% of adults globally did not meet recommended physical activity levels in 2022, highlighting the need to make healthy choices and opportunities for physical activity more accessible. Through health education, health risk assessments, media engagement and community outreach, the Foundation encouraged people to know their numbers, recognise warning signs, stay on prescribed treatment and make healthier choices to protect their heart and brain health.

For media enquiries, please contact Themba Mzondi, PR and Communications Officer on 021 422 1586 / 078 113 5216 or email themba.mzondi@heartfoundation.co.za. Media engagement will be carried out by the CEO, Health Promotion and Health Risk Assessment Officers and Allied Health Care staff, such as Dietitians.

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 and www.x.com/SAHeartStroke

