



Press Release

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The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa's recognition of World Stroke Week and World Stroke Day 2026

A stroke can happen suddenly, at any age, including in very young children which could change a person's life trajectory in an instant. This World Stroke Week 2026, the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA), a member of the World Stroke Organisation (WSO) and a partner to the FAST Heroes campaign, is raising awareness under the global message **"Every M1NUTE counts. Know the signs of stroke,"** while incorporating its own theme: **"Every year counts, because strokes are getting younger."** Prof Pamela Naidoo, CEO of the HSFSA reinforces the fact that knowledge is empowering and hence knowing the risk factors, as well as what to do once you had a stroke has an **important** effect on positive health outcomes. She states that what you do after a stroke is just as important as the treatment you receive when you have a stroke.

To better understand the changing burden of stroke in South Africa, the HSFSA compared national cerebrovascular disease mortality data from 2013 and 2024. The findings are concerning: cerebrovascular disease rose from the fourth-leading cause of death in 2013, accounting for 22,463 deaths (4.9%), to the third-leading cause in 2024, with 25,539 deaths (5.4%). Among people aged 15–44, deaths increased from 1,911 to 2,045 over the same period, while cerebrovascular disease moved from the ninth to the fifth leading cause of death in this age group. These findings reinforce the importance of raising awareness, that stroke can affect people of all ages and that recognising the warning signs and acting quickly can save lives. Globally, one in four adults is expected to experience a stroke in their lifetime.

A stroke occurs when blood flow to part of the brain is interrupted, causing brain cells to die. With an estimated 1.9 million brain cells lost every minute, recognising the warning signs and seeking emergency medical care immediately can save lives and reduce long-term disability. Stroke is increasingly recognised as a health concern among younger adults, including those in their 40s, 50s and early 60s. While older ages remain an important risk factor, stroke is not exclusively a disease of older people. International research suggests that the growing burden of stroke among younger adults is associated with the increasing prevalence of high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, obesity, smoking, physical inactivity and changing environments. Stroke survivor and HSFSA champion and patient voice, Tanielle Flint, notes: "Too often, we think we are too young to have a stroke, but age does not make us immune. Knowing the symptoms or signs and seeking emergency medical help immediately can make all the difference."

Another concern is that younger people may underestimate their risk and delay routine health screenings, allowing underlying conditions to go undetected. This is particularly important if you have a family history of risk such as raised glucose, CVD and raised cholesterol. However, behavioural choices are not the only cause, as certain heart conditions, blood disorders and other medical conditions can also lead to strokes. Although the risk of stroke generally increases with age, stroke can also occur in babies and children, although it is less common.

Stroke prevention goes beyond individual behavioural choices; it also involves understanding the social, economic and environmental factors that influence one's health. Financial constraints can make it difficult for people to access nutritious food, healthcare services or attend regular health

screenings. Chronic stress, tobacco use, physical inactivity, obesity and excessive alcohol consumption can also increase the risk of stroke, particularly when they contribute to high blood pressure and cause damage to blood vessels.

Evidence shows that gaps in health outcomes between rural and urban communities have widened significantly over the past three decades. In rural and underserved areas, people face long travel distances to hospitals and rehabilitation services, lack of reliable transport, limited access to affordable healthy food, and built environments that are not safe for physical activity due to missing sidewalks, unsafe roads and lack of recreational spaces. These barriers increase stroke risk, delay emergency care, and reduce participation in rehabilitation, while social isolation, depression and limited access to mental health support further worsen recovery.

The HSFSa encourages individuals and communities to take practical steps towards reducing their stroke risk. Up to 70% of strokes are preventable through healthy living — a diverse diet, exercise, healthy weight and not smoking. The best protection comes from a diverse diet rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes and healthy oils — a pattern very close to indigenous African eating. Indigenous foods like morogo, Bambara groundnut, cowpeas, sorghum and millet are nutrient-dense, affordable and rich in compounds that help control high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity. Healthy eating doesn't have to cost more; beyond maize, wheat and rice, affordable options like beans, lentils, eggs, seasonal produce and indigenous foods, plus home cooking, buying local and seasonal, and meal planning, can help families prevent stroke on a tight budget. Moreover, another highly recommended diet is the Mediterranean diet. Regular health screenings and early management of existing medical conditions are equally important. While not all strokes can be prevented, addressing modifiable risk factors and improving access to healthcare and healthy living environments can help reduce the risk. Stroke prevention is a shared responsibility that requires both individual action and supportive families, communities and environments.

Strong support systems before and after a stroke are critical to prevention and to long-term recovery. Having family, friends, community groups and healthcare workers around you helps with early detection and better control of risk factors. Support from loved ones and community structures encourages adherence to medication, attendance at clinic appointments, healthy eating and regular physical activity, while also reducing stress, anxiety, depression and social isolation – all of which are linked to increased stroke risk. Community involvement is therefore essential, through community health workers, local clinics, stroke support groups, caregiver networks and community-based health education. The HSFSa's Mended Heart and Stroke Group (MHSG) is a key example of such community support. It is a free monthly meeting for all those who have suffered a heart attack or stroke, caregivers, and their families and friends, with regional meetings in selected areas in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. MHSG provides educational support regarding all areas of primary and secondary cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease prevention, and emotional support in the form of a trusted, caring community to those already affected by a cardiovascular event. Support groups like these are vital to reducing social isolation and helping survivors and families navigate recovery.

The community also plays a vital role in ensuring that people know how to respond to a suspected stroke and access emergency care without delay - particularly in rural and semi-rural areas. Communities should identify the nearest healthcare facilities, know how to contact emergency medical services by calling 112 from a cellphone or 10177 for an ambulance, and establish practical transport and support plans for those who may struggle to reach care. Community health workers, local leaders and organisations can also help share stroke awareness messages, recognise warning signs and encourage families to act immediately rather than wait for symptoms to improve. Early action can save lives and reduce long-term disability. In our FAST Heroes programme, even young school-going children are taught to recognize the signs and symptoms of a stroke.

Stroke recovery does not begin and end in hospital. Early treatment and active participation in rehabilitation are key to recovery after a stroke, particularly for younger people who have a greater capacity for neuroplasticity - the brain's ability to reorganise and form new neural connections after injury. Early and consistent engagement in physiotherapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy helps the brain to recover movement, speech and cognitive function more effectively. This not only improves independence and quality of life, but also reduces long-term disability and the risk of recurrent stroke. Encouraging younger stroke survivors to remain active in their recovery journey is important to unlocking this recovery potential. Mental health intervention is also vital in the recovery process. A neuropsychologist can assess the residual damage from a stroke which can inform rehabilitation.

We call on the Government and all stakeholders to prioritise safe environments for physical activity through investment in walkways, parks and safe public spaces, to create healthy food environments that improve access to affordable, nutritious and indigenous foods, and to strengthen primary health care, rehabilitation and mental health services in rural and peri-urban communities. As highlighted in the American Heart Association's call to action on rural health, addressing the unique needs of rural populations must be a priority in programming, research and policy to eliminate health disparities and achieve health equity.

World Stroke Week culminates on World Stroke Day, 29 October 2026, when communities come together to raise awareness of the burden of stroke and the importance of prevention, early recognition and timely treatment. To mark the occasion, landmarks in South Africa and around the world will light up in green as a visible reminder of the millions of lives affected by stroke and the urgent need for greater awareness and action. Together, we can help ensure that more people recognise the signs of stroke and understand that every minute counts. Together we can mobilize to reduce the prevalence and burden of strokes. Strokes are costly to the individual, to the healthcare system and the country as a whole.

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 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, www.x.com/SAHeartStroke and www.instagram.com/heartstrokesa

