



Press Release

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World Obesity Day 2026: 8 billion reasons to act on obesity

This year on 4th March, the global health community will unite to raise awareness about the fact that there are numerous root causes for obesity. In particular this year, the Foundation wishes to highlight the fact that obesity is also classified as a medical condition. Guided by the World Obesity Federation, using the theme: “**8 billion reasons to act on obesity**”, many relevant health-related stakeholders will drive action on the detection, prevention and treatment of obesity. The theme highlights the fact that each of the 8 billion people on the planet deserves a future with good health. World Obesity Day (WOD) provides a **crucial opportunity to address the growing health challenge affecting over 1 billion people, including 159 million children worldwide**, with projections indicating that half the global population will be living with overweight and obesity by 2035. The prevalence of obesity among school-aged children has risen fivefold—from 4% in 1975 to about 20% in 2022. This increase in childhood obesity is contributing to the early onset of non-communicable diseases, including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular conditions. South African- specific prevalence figures are also concerning: more than half of adults are living with overweight or obesity, with two-thirds of women affected. "Obesity is a broad societal issue accompanied by an obesogenic environment that requires comprehensive action plans to reduce its burden," says Prof Pamela Naidoo, CEO of HSFSa. She states that "By changing the environment, providing support, and utilising science-backed treatment options, we can empower individuals to make better health choices to combat obesity". Obesity is one of the key risk factors for heart disease, strokes and the associated risk factors.

The HSFSa in partnership with the NDOH and others have focussed on WODs theme for South Africa: “**Healthy Environments, Healthy Futures**”, recognising obesity as a complex, chronic condition shaped by environments and systems. The World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies obesity as a chronic, progressive, and relapsing disease, characterised by excessive body fat that can harm health outcomes. Factors such as a changing food environment, genetic risk, stress, mental health, and limited access to healthcare all play a role. Obesity is a serious medical condition, not merely a choice of unhealthy behaviours, and it's time to tackle it as such. Stigma and weight discrimination worsen health outcomes, making it harder to address the issue. By recognising the multiple roots of obesity, we can reduce stigma, improve quality of life, and develop more effective approaches to prevention and care. The Heart and Stroke

Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) is collaborating with the National Department of Health (NDoH) and other stakeholders to create healthier environments and address the root causes of obesity, shifting focus from individual behaviour to include broader structural factors. This includes tackling food accessibility and affordability, marketing of unhealthy products, and inequality – issues that require supportive systems rather than individual blame. Every one of us has a role to play in creating a world where obesity is better understood rather than stigmatised: a world that prioritises prevention from the earliest years, supports people living with obesity, allowing their voices to be heard, ensures equitable access to health care, and builds systems that enable healthier lives for all.

As we mark World Obesity Day, one of the key areas gaining attention is the role of GLP-1 medications in treating obesity. GLP-1 (Glucagon-like peptide-1) is a natural hormone that helps control appetite and blood sugar levels. The term "GLP-1" is also commonly used to refer to a class of medications called GLP-1 receptor agonists, which mimic this hormone. These medications treat type 2 diabetes and obesity by reducing appetite and improving blood sugar control. Developed for diabetes management, they grabbed public attention when studies revealed significant weight loss benefits. There is increasing evidence showing the effectiveness of GLP-1 receptor agonists, which led the WHO to develop its first-ever guidelines on these drugs in 2025, providing conditional recommendations for treating adults with obesity. The WHO recommendation applies to people with obesity ($\text{BMI} \geq 30 \text{ kg/m}^2$) but does not include people with BMI between 27 kg/m^2 and 30 kg/m^2 in association with one or two obesity-related diseases and disorders. Furthermore, the WHO also states that people living with obesity should receive tailored counselling on behaviour change.

The GLP-1 medications work best when combined with a healthy diet and regular exercise – they're not a replacement for lifestyle and behaviour changes. Furthermore, weight gain after stopping these medications can happen because the medication helps regulate appetite and slows gastric emptying, making you feel fuller for longer. When you stop taking it, these effects wear off, and your appetite might increase, leading to eating more and potentially gaining weight. In South Africa, SAHPRA (South African Health Products Regulatory Authority) has warned about falsified and substandard GLP-1 products being sold online and through social media, posing a serious health threat. It is critical to remember that GLP-1s aren't a magic fix – they require behavior modification, behavioural support, and ongoing medical checks to work effectively.

Our dietitians, Ms. Cari Erasmus and Ms. Shonisani Nephelama at the Foundation emphasize that medication alone isn't a quick fix. It's a societal issue requiring a team effort. The solution lies in the WHO's three-pillar strategy for obesity prevention and management:

- **Healthier Environments:** Make healthy food and exercise options more accessible and affordable. This includes regulating the marketing of unhealthy foods, especially to kids, and encouraging food manufacturers to prioritise nutrition, such as the Foundation's Heart Mark Endorsement Program.

- **Protect Those at Risk:** Identify individuals likely to develop obesity early through risk assessment screenings, and provide early support with healthy habits and regular check-ins.
- **Lifelong Care:** Offer ongoing guidance and support for sustainable health outcomes. Ensure equal access to everyone.

Interviews will be conducted with our CEO, Prof Pamela Naidoo and our Health Professional Teams.

To co-ordinate 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

