



THE HEART
AND STROKE
FOUNDATION
SOUTH AFRICA

Taking Employee Wellness to the Heart and Brain during COVID-19

The Coronavirus pandemic may be stressful for employers and employees, as fear and anxiety about the personal and economic consequences of COVID-19 can be overwhelming. As COVID-19 continues its devastation across South Africa and the world, emerging data and information from health experts, support the fact that there are worse health outcomes for hospitalized patients with an underlying medical condition and are COVID-19 positive. Heart disease, strokes diabetes, high blood pressure (hypertension), and HIV/AIDS/TB co-morbidities are known to cause complications in South Africa often resulting in death.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) takes workplace wellness seriously. We acknowledge that most people spend the most part of their day at work, albeit virtually. The Foundation, therefore, wants to highlight the importance of **Employee Wellness Week from 6th --to – 10th July 2020**. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the average person spends a third of their adult life in the workplace. We encourage all employers to invest in regular wellness days to improve the health and well- being of their employees.

Why are healthy behaviours important for wellness?

The HSFSA adopts a health promotion and disease prevention approach to managing medical conditions and overall health in the workplace. As individuals we can act on reducing risk factors which put us at risk for Cardiovascular disease (CVD) [heart disease and strokes].

An important health behaviour is eating habits. Eating healthy is about making healthy food choices daily, how those choices add up and affects our health. Often employees are faced with unhealthy choices provided by staff canteens and vending machines filled with salt and sugar laden foods which do not promote health. An increased salt intake is linked to raised blood pressure, people living with hypertension are more likely to have complications from COVID-19. Choose healthy food options to enhance your immune system. Also remember that meal preparation makes life easier and helps to avoid overeating. The Foundation runs the **Heart Mark and Diabetes SA Endorsements Programmes** to help individuals make healthy food choices.

A lack of physical activity increases the chance of developing many non-communicable (NCDs) diseases like high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease to name a few – these are linked to stress, depression and anxiety. It is important to be active as physical activity not

only reduces the risk of heart disease and strokes, but plays a vital role in stress relief as well. Stress alone does not cause CVD, but stress has been associated with an increased risk of CVD. Anxiety and depression often lead to unintentional unhealthy behaviours, such as not exercising, eating unhealthily, and excessive smoking or drinking alcohol.

Tobacco smoking is also a key risk factor for CVD onset. The WHO states that the harms of tobacco use are well established and causes 8 million deaths every year from CVD, lung disorders, cancers, diabetes and hypertension. Smoking increases your risk for respiratory disorders leading to serious COVID-19 complications.

Healthy Behaviours and COVID-19: Hygiene and social distancing are important behaviours to maintain during the pandemic. Be aware of the COVID-19 symptoms and be sure to call the public hotline 0800 029 999, or your doctor if you have a fever, cough, sore throat or any other symptoms. Do not neglect your treatment if you have any co-morbid condition such as hypertension and CVD.

What can Employers and Managers do to ensure workplace wellness?

Dana Govender, Health Promotions Manager at the Foundation states that: “A caring employer always wants to do their best to help ensure the well-being of their employees”. Employers can invest in an employee wellness day (s). **The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa** can conduct health risk assessments which includes blood pressure measures, cholesterol, blood glucose and Body Mass Index (BMI). The assessments can also be accompanied by a health talk, to advise employees about healthy lifestyle choices. We are also able to conduct virtual health talks and offer information leaflets.”

Employers can also ensure water stations are available as well as fridges and microwaves to encourage employees to bring healthy food from home, instead of reverting to fast food. Employers can also ensure that healthier snacks are available in vending machines.

Prof. Pamela Naidoo, CEO of **the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa**, says, “Whether you are an employer or an employee, changing behaviour is never easy, and some of the greatest benefits of a wellness programme are decreased health costs, increased productivity, reduced absenteeism and improved staff morale. A wellness programme enriches the physical, mental, emotional and occupational well-being of employees. This ultimately benefits the business or place of employment”

Ends

Interviews will be conducted with our Health Promotions Manager, Dana Govender. To co-ordinate and confirm interview dates you are welcome to contact the Public Relations and Communications Department on 021 422 1586 or

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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 and www.twitter.com/SAHeartStroke