



Press Release

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The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa's commemoration of World Stroke Week and World Stroke Day 2024

"Prevention is better than cure". This statement rings true for the prevention of strokes, which is known to cause death and disability and lead to poor health outcomes. World Stroke Week (WSW), commemorated between 28th October to 3rd November, is one of the Foundation's annual flagship campaigns, in line with the global stroke campaigns. The aim of this important campaign is primarily to raise awareness about strokes and its devastating effects. Globally, World Stroke Week culminates in World Stroke Day on the 29th October. The World Stroke Organization (WSO) and their membership, of which the HSFA forms a part of, conceptualised the theme for World Stroke Day this year as **Harnessing the Power of Sport to be #Greater Than Stroke**. This is in line with the 2023 theme, which was **#Greater than Stroke**. The 2024 theme is to harness the power of sport to drive stroke awareness and prevention, motivate everyone to take action every day to reduce our stroke risk by moving more, and to encourage early physical rehabilitation.

Prof Pamela Naidoo, the CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa, reminds the public that: "According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 15 million people worldwide suffer a stroke annually and of this number, 5 million die and another 5 million are left permanently disabled, placing a burden on families and communities." Stroke is relatively uncommon in people under the age of 40 years. However, when it does occur, the main cause is raised blood pressure and severe hypertension. However, stroke also occurs in about 8% of children with sickle cell disease. The World Stroke Organisation (WSO) quotes a figure of 6.6 million individuals who will die as a result of a stroke, and 1 in 4 over the age of 25 will have a stroke in their lifetime. The incidence of strokes increases with age although over 62% of strokes happen to people under the age of 70 and 16% happen to those under the age of 50.

One of the pillars of the Foundations campaign for Stroke is to create greater and deeper public awareness about the different aspects of strokes, including what exactly a stroke is. A stroke is a cerebrovascular event which includes a variety of medical conditions that affect the blood vessels of the brain and the cerebral circulation. Arteries supplying oxygen and nutrients to the brain are often damaged or deformed in these disorders. A stroke, also called a "**brain attack**", occurs when there is a blockage in the blood supply to part of the brain or when a blood vessel in the brain bursts. Strokes are to your brain what a heart attack is to your heart. If the brain does not receive sufficient oxygen or nutrients, brain cells start to die which may be permanent in nature. A stroke can cause lasting brain damage, long-term disability, or even death. Anybody can have a stroke, but it is more common in older adults, with two-thirds occurring in individuals over the age of 65. Certain medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, and a history of stroke or heart attack, increase the risk of stroke. There are two main types of strokes: ischemic, caused by a lack of blood flow in the brain due to a blockage, and hemorrhagic, caused by bleeding in the brain due to a burst vessel. Both types result in brain dysfunction and are treated differently. Knowing the warning signs and symptoms of a stroke is crucial for quick action and increased chances of survival. Symptoms include sudden weakness

or numbness, loss of speech, confusion, vision loss, severe headache, dizziness, and trouble walking. Prof Naidoo states that it is unfortunate that the individual having a stroke often does not realise this, and it is, therefore, important that everyone, in all age groups, become aware of stroke symptoms.

The warning signs of a stroke are sudden and knowing how to recognise the signs of a stroke is an important first step in getting the affected person treatment. An important ACRONYM for stroke symptoms to remember is **FAST**:

Face: Is one side of the face droopy? Can the person smile/show their teeth?

Arms: Is one side weak? Can the person raise both arms for 10 seconds without 1 arm leaning lower than the other?

Speech: Is the person able to speak? Are the words slurred? Can they repeat a simple sentence?

Time: If even one of these signs is present, act quickly and call emergency services. "Minutes can save lives"

Stroke prevention is an important pillar during World Stroke Week and at the Foundation we would like to highlight the different controllable and uncontrollable risk factors for stroke. Uncontrollable factors include age, sex, and family history, while controllable factors include unhealthy behaviours such as eating an unhealthy diet that is high in fat, salt and sugar; lack of exercising regularly, smoking, stress, uncontrolled chronic disease, and being obese. The role of physical activity in the prevention of stroke is important as a lack of activity is a risk factor for strokes. Having a combination of risk factors ultimately places pressure on primary healthcare resources.

The WHO defines physical activity as any bodily movement requiring energy expenditure. Both moderate and vigorous-intensity physical activity improve overall health. Insufficient physical activity increases the risk of death by 20% to 30% compared to those who are sufficiently active. Popular ways of physical activity include walking, cycling, wheeling, sports, active recreation, and play. Regular physical activity helps prevent and manage noncommunicable diseases like heart disease, stroke, diabetes type 2, and cancers, prevents hypertension, maintains healthy body weight, and improves mental health, quality of life, and well-being. Maintaining a healthy body weight can reduce stroke risk, as individuals with obesity have a 64% and overweight individuals have a 22% higher risk of stroke compared to those at normal weight. Thirty minutes of activity five times a week can reduce stroke risk by 25%

The Foundation's Health Promotion & Health Risk Assessments Officers state that post stroke care is very crucial to good recovery. The use of physical activity as a therapeutic strategy to maximise functional recovery in the rehabilitation of stroke survivors has a growing evidence base. At the HSFSA, raised blood pressure is a significant risk factor in the communities we work in. Physical inactivity after stroke is common, but exercise training can help lower the risk of cardiovascular disease, increase ability to perform your duties, and enhance quality of life. In order to prevent secondary stroke, it is essential to promote low-to-moderate-intensity aerobic and muscle-strengthening exercises like walking, yoga, Swimming or cycling and control other risk factors like high blood pressure. A stroke survivor can regain full function with regular exercise. Up to 70% of strokes can be prevented by adopting healthy behaviours.

According to a research paper that was released 1st October 2011 by ISRN Neurology: Physical Activity in the Prevention and Treatment of Stroke - The findings of the meta-analysis, including data across multiple countries (UK, USA, Europe, etc), were that a high level of occupational physical activity was associated with a stroke risk reduction of 43% when compared to occupational inactivity and a relative stroke risk reduction of 23% when compared to a moderate level of occupational activity. Moderate amounts of physical activity at work were associated with a 36% reduction in risk of stroke compared with being inactive at work. High levels of leisure-time

physical activity were associated with a stroke risk reduction of 20–25% when compared to being inactive during leisure time. The risk reduction when comparing moderate levels of leisure-time physical activity to inactivity was 15%.

Digital health has been transforming the practice of medicine since 2020 due to COVID pandemic. Advanced digital technology gadgets like smartwatches and devices are increasingly used in various medical fields, including stroke management. These advancements help identify and determine symptoms of stroke, address concerns related to heart health, and monitor heart health without complicated procedures. For example, some smartwatches have an electrocardiogram (ECG) function that can detect an irregular heartbeat (stroke risk factor). The American Heart Association's recent review highlights the significant potential of mobile health technologies in enhancing CVD prevention and behaviour modification. Digital technology can enhance access to primary stroke and cardiovascular disease prevention services and support the achievement of health and well-being.

Our Dietitians, Shonisani Nephalama and Cari Erasmus state that “dietary factors play a significant role in stroke prevention and management”. Strokes are more common due to hypertension and atherosclerosis, which are linked to high blood cholesterol concentrations, high sodium intake, dietary saturated fat and cholesterol, and low fibre intake. Higher sodium intake is linked to a 25% higher risk of stroke compared to lower sodium intake. Epidemiologic studies have shown that certain factors, such as a healthy dietary pattern that are high in potassium, low in sodium and fat and rich in vegetables, fruits, legumes, cereal fibre, and whole grains may reduce stroke risk. Replacing saturated fat and cholesterol with monounsaturated fat from olive oil can help reduce stroke risk. A study by Dan Hu et al., found that an increased intake of fruits and vegetables by 200g daily is associated with reducing risk of stroke by 32% and 11%.

Harnessing the Power of Sport and physical activity every day reduces your risk of developing cardiovascular diseases as well as cerebrovascular disease. It is also imperative to commence physical activity and rehabilitation as early as possible after a stroke to ensure the best possible outcome for the stroke survivor. Together we can be #Greater than Stroke.

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

