



Press Release

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The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa's commemoration of World Stroke Week and World Stroke Day 2025

The week of 28 October, the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) joins the global stroke organizations and their membership in commemorating World Stroke Week (WSW). WSW and World Stroke Day takes precedence at the Foundation as it is one of the flagship annual health events on our calendar aimed at raising in-depth awareness about the various types of strokes and the devastating effect on stroke patients who do not get correct and timeous access to health services. The week-long WSW campaign is aligned with the World Stroke Organization (WSO) and culminates in World Stroke Day (WSD) on 29 October annually. This year's theme, **"Every Minute Counts: Let's Act Together"**, emphasizes the urgent need for early recognition and rapid response to stroke symptoms. With 1.9 million brain cells dying every minute during a stroke, time truly is brain. But there is hope — if we **#ActFAST**, we can save lives, improve recovery, and reduce disability for stroke survivors. Stroke can affect people of all ages, at any time. The quicker we recognize the signs and take action by getting emergency medical help, the better the health outcomes. This is why public education, awareness, and a collective effort to ACT FAST are at the heart of this year's campaign.

According to the World Stroke Organization, 12 million people suffer a stroke each year—one every two seconds—and 1 in 4 people worldwide will experience a stroke in their lifetime. A stroke happens without warning, cutting off blood and oxygen to the brain. Every minute it goes untreated, 1.9 million brain cells die, drastically increasing the risk of death or long-term disability. In fact, 1 in 2 people will die from a stroke, and two-thirds of survivors are left with lasting complications affecting speech, movement, and daily independence. However, recognising the signs and acting fast can make all the difference. Prompt medical attention not only saves lives but also increases the chance of recovery. Advanced medical interventions are known to reverse stroke symptoms in many cases, especially if the affected person gets to a stroke ready centre on time. Every minute matters—know the signs, act FAST, and help save a life.

Stroke is a medical emergency that occurs when blood flow to a part of the brain is interrupted or reduced, depriving brain tissue of oxygen and nutrients. Within minutes, brain cells begin to die, making stroke one of the leading causes of disability and death worldwide and in South Africa. There's two main types, **ischaemic stroke** caused by a blockage or clot in a blood vessel supplying the brain and **haemorrhagic stroke**, which happens when a weakened blood vessel ruptures and causes bleeding in or around the brain. There is also **Transient Ischemic Stroke**, which is a related condition often referred to as a 'mini-stroke', produces temporary symptoms and serves as a warning sign of future risk. Early recognition and urgent treatment are vital, everyone is encouraged to remember the **FAST** acronym – **F**ace drooping, **A**rm weakness, **S**peech difficulty and **T**ime to call emergency services immediately.

A review by Tribelhor et al. (2021) found that individuals with hypertension, a key risk factor, are three to four times more likely to experience a stroke. It is estimated that one in three adults fall between the high normal to hypertensive range and 50% of these cases are untreated or not adherent to the prescribed medical regimen. In South Africa, stroke incidence and management are further complicated by the country's high HIV burden, with an estimated prevalence of 20%—most commonly affecting individuals under the age of 50. HIV is a significant comorbidity and risk factor for stroke, with multiple underlying mechanisms, including vasculopathy, coagulopathy, and a higher risk of opportunistic infections.

After a stroke, early rehabilitation is crucial to maximizing recovery and preventing long-term disability. A multidisciplinary rehabilitation team often includes the neurologist/physician, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, mental health practitioners, nurses, and dietitians. The team works together to support the patient's recovery with the ultimate end point being a state of independence. . Physiotherapists play a key role in helping stroke survivors improve mobility, balance, and muscle strength, while occupational therapists assist with relearning everyday tasks. Physical inactivity is common after a stroke, which can further impair function, slow recovery, and increase the risk of secondary complications. Despite strong evidence supporting the effectiveness of stroke rehabilitation and exercise-based therapy, these services are often underused or delayed, particularly in the public hospital setting, limiting potential for recovery.

While stroke often strikes without warning, it rarely happens without a cause. The most significant risk factor for stroke is high, uncontrolled blood pressure, followed closely by atrial fibrillation, a type of irregular heartbeat that can drastically increase stroke risk. Rather than a single trigger, most strokes result from a combination of risk factors. Stroke risk factors can be grouped into two categories: those we can control and those we can't. Uncontrollable risk factors include age, gender (with women facing a higher risk after menopause), genetics, and poverty, which may limit access to healthy living options and healthcare.

The encouraging news is that up to 80% of strokes are preventable through changes in behaviour. Controllable risk factors such as high blood pressure, high bad cholesterol, atrial fibrillation, smoking and vaping, obesity, poor diet, diabetes mellitus, excessive alcohol intake, and physical inactivity can all be managed or reduced with the right steps. Making healthy behavioural choices plays a vital role in lowering the risk of stroke. The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) continues to highlight the importance of prevention, early detection, access to the right information and the significant role it plays on improved health outcomes.

Over decades, we have reached out to diverse communities, creating public awareness and educating individuals and groups to understand their risk factors, recognize the warning signs of stroke, and take necessary steps timeously. This not only saves lives but also helps reduce the chances of long-term disability.

HSFSA is proud to collaborate with FAST Heroes, an award-winning educational initiative that empowers primary school children to recognize stroke symptoms and take timely action. This global health education program teaches kids to identify stroke signs through a fun, 5-week curriculum, ultimately becoming young heroes who can save lives. As part of HSFSA's School Health Program Initiative (SHPI), we're able to extend the FAST Heroes program to more schools, teachers, learners, and their families. The program works to increase awareness about stroke prevention and management among school-going children, equipping them with life-saving skills

and knowledge to respond to stroke emergencies. By fostering a culture of health and wellness in schools and communities, we can support the development of healthy habits and behaviors from a young age. This initiative is an excellent example of how collaborative efforts can make a meaningful impact in the fight against stroke, ultimately promoting a healthier, more resilient society.

This World Stroke Day, HSFSA calls on individuals, communities, and organizations to join forces in the fight against stroke. To mark this important day, we will be hosting community-centered events around the country, bringing people together to raise awareness, share knowledge, and support those affected by stroke. The Foundation's Mended Hearts and Stroke Support Groups (MHSGs) is an example of our outreach work where we will be providing educational resources to stroke survivors, caregivers, families, and healthcare professionals, empowering them with the knowledge and support they need to navigate the challenges of stroke recovery and prevention. The organization is also committed to preventing stroke through proactive risk assessment and management. HSFSA has a key focus on measuring key risk factors for stroke, such as high blood pressure, high blood sugar, and cholesterol, by conducting health risk assessments. These assessments enable individuals to understand their personal risk profile and take informed decisions to reduce their likelihood of experiencing a stroke. Employers can also play a vital role in supporting their employees' health by arranging these assessments in the workplace, promoting a healthier and more productive workforce.

In the lead-up to WSD on October 29, 2025, HSFSA is calling on companies and organizations to show their support for stroke awareness by lighting up in green, a symbol of awareness for stroke survivors. Let's all come together this WSW and WSD, as we work towards a future where everyone has access to the care they need to prevent, survive a stroke and get access to healthcare. In particular we look forward to collaborating more with our Provincial and National Departments of Health to reduce the mortality and morbidity for strokes.

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

