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International Multiple Sclerosis Month

May 2026

May marks global awareness of multiple sclerosis (MS), a chronic neurological condition that affects how the brain and body communicate. While MS is not always widely understood, increasing awareness can help individuals recognise symptoms earlier and better support those living with the condition.

What is multiple sclerosis?

Multiple sclerosis occurs when the body's immune system mistakenly attacks the protective layer (myelin) surrounding nerve fibres. This disrupts the signals between the brain and the rest of the body, which can lead to a wide range of symptoms. Over time, this damage may become permanent, affecting mobility, sensation and other functions. The progression and severity of MS vary significantly from person to person.

Recognising the symptoms

MS presents differently in everyone, depending on where nerve damage occurs. Common symptoms include:

- **Vision changes**, such as blurred or double vision, or pain during eye movement.
- **Mobility challenges**, including weakness, poor coordination and difficulty walking.
- **Sensory symptoms**, such as numbness, tingling or electric-shock sensations.
- **Fatigue and cognitive changes**, including memory difficulties and shifts in mood.

Symptoms may come and go or gradually worsen over time.

Different types of MS

There are several forms of multiple sclerosis, each with its own pattern of progression:

- **Relapsing-remitting MS (RRMS):** The most common type, characterised by flare-ups (relapses) followed by periods of recovery (remission).
- **Primary-progressive MS (PPMS):** A steady progression of symptoms over time without clear relapses.
- **Secondary-progressive MS (SPMS):** Initially follows a relapsing-remitting pattern before transitioning into more consistent progression.

Causes and treatment

The exact cause of MS is not fully understood, but it is believed to involve a combination of genetic predisposition and environmental factors, including viral triggers such as Epstein-Barr.

While there is currently no cure, advances in treatment have significantly improved outcomes. Disease-modifying therapies can help reduce the frequency of relapses, slow disease progression and manage symptoms, enabling many individuals to maintain a good quality of life.

When to seek medical advice

Persistent or unexplained symptoms such as numbness, vision changes or balance difficulties, should be assessed by a healthcare professional. Early evaluation can support timely diagnosis and management.

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National Burns Awareness Week

5 – 9 May 2026

National Burns Awareness Week in South Africa highlights the risks associated with fires and burns with a strong focus on safer homes and communities. As temperatures drop and the use of heating, candles and gas appliances increases, so too does the risk of household fires.

Taking a few preventative steps can go a long way in protecting your home and the people in it. Common fire risks to watch for, include:

Faulty wiring and appliances - Electrical faults remain one of the leading causes of house fires. Ensure that any electrical work is carried out by a qualified electrician and meets required safety standards. Always request a Certificate of Compliance — it's a critical safeguard, not just a formality.

Overloaded plugs and unattended devices - Everyday habits can increase fire risk more than we realise:

Avoid overloading plug points with multiple adapters or extension cords.

- Unplug high-heat devices like hair straighteners after use and allow them to cool safely.
- Never leave appliances such as heaters, ovens or fans running unattended.
- Switch off decorative lighting when not in use to prevent overheating.
- During periods of load shedding, it's also advisable to switch off appliances at the plug to prevent surges or automatic restart when power returns.

Open flames and heating sources - Candles, fireplaces and portable heaters should always be used with caution:

- Never leave open flames unattended.
- Keep flammable items such as curtains, bedding and furniture at a safe distance.
- Ensure chimneys are cleaned regularly to prevent blockages.
- Use a fire screen to contain sparks and embers.

Gas safety in the home - Gas appliances are increasingly used in South African households, particularly during power interruptions. However, proper storage is essential to reduce fire risk.

According to SANS guidelines:

- Flats, townhouses and cluster homes:
 - o Up to 9kg cylinders may be stored indoors
 - o Larger cylinders must be stored outside
- Freestanding homes:
 - o Up to 19kg cylinders may be stored indoors
 - o Larger cylinders must be stored outside

If you store gas in a garage, remember that an attached garage is considered part of the home. It's also important to check your insurance policy, as non-compliance with safety requirements could impact future claims.

Being prepared is one of the most effective ways to reduce both the risk and impact of a household fire. Simple steps, such as installing and regularly testing smoke alarms, creating a clear escape plan with at least two exit routes per room, and ensuring windows with burglar bars have quick-release mechanisms, can make a critical difference in an emergency. Keeping a fire extinguisher and fire blanket easily accessible in the kitchen can also provide an added layer of protection.

If a fire occurs, act quickly and seek help immediately.

Call 10177 or 112 from your mobile phone for emergency assistance.

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World Hypertension Day

17 May 2026

World Hypertension Day is observed each year to raise awareness of high blood pressure — often referred to as the “silent killer” due to its lack of obvious symptoms. Despite being a leading contributor to serious health conditions, many people remain unaware that they are affected.

Globally, hypertension is estimated to contribute to more than 10 million deaths each year, making early detection and ongoing management critically important.

What is hypertension?

Hypertension occurs when blood pressure remains consistently elevated, typically at 140/90 mmHg or higher. Because it can develop without symptoms, many people may be unaware they have it.

It is estimated that around 4 in 10 adults have raised blood pressure, with risk increasing due to factors such as age, family history, diet, inactivity and stress. If left unmanaged, high blood pressure can increase the risk of:

- **Heart disease**
- **Stroke**
- **Kidney disease**

Early awareness plays an important role in reducing these long-term risks.

The importance of checking your blood pressure

A key focus of World Hypertension Day is encouraging regular screening to help individuals understand their numbers and take action where needed.

Hypertension can often be managed through simple lifestyle adjustments, including:

- Maintaining a healthy, balanced diet and reducing salt intake
- Staying physically active
- Managing stress
- Maintaining a healthy weight

Knowing your blood pressure is a simple but important step in supporting long-term wellbeing. Regular checks and small lifestyle changes can make a meaningful difference over time.

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WORLD NO TOBACCO ----- DAY -----



World No Tobacco Day 31 May 2026

As World No Tobacco Day approaches, attention is turning to the growing use of vaping products among younger populations - and what this means for families, communities and future workforce wellbeing.

This year's theme, 'Unmasking the Appeal: Exposing Industry Tactics on Tobacco and Nicotine Products', highlights how modern nicotine products are designed and marketed to appear appealing, particularly to younger audiences. From flavoured options to sleek, tech-inspired devices, vaping is often positioned as a safer, more socially acceptable alternative to smoking - but the reality is more complex.

A growing trend among South African youth

Recent research indicates that vaping is becoming increasingly common among school learners. A 2023 study of more than 25,000 high school students found that nearly **17% reported current use**, while over **36% had tried vaping**. Notably, almost half of those who vape reported doing so within an hour of waking — a potential indicator of nicotine dependence.

Usage appears consistent across different socio-economic groups, suggesting that accessibility - rather than income - is a key driver.

What's driving the increase?

Several factors are contributing to the rise in youth vaping:

- **Flavoured products** that make vaping more palatable.
- **Modern, discreet device designs** that resemble everyday tech.
- **Social media influence and peer visibility.**
- **Easy access**, with inconsistent age-verification practices.

Research by the South African Tobacco Free Youth Forum also points to the widespread availability and prominent display of nicotine products near schools, increasing exposure and normalisation.

Understanding the risks

While often perceived as a lower-risk alternative, organisations such as the Cancer Association of South Africa highlight that vaping still carries important health considerations - particularly for adolescents. Nicotine exposure during this stage of development has been linked to:

- Increased risk of **addiction**.
- Potential impacts on **brain development and concentration**.
- Higher likelihood of **anxiety and mood-related challenges**.
- Greater risk of transitioning to **traditional tobacco use**.

As the regulatory environment continues to evolve, awareness and education remain key. Providing clear, balanced information can help young people better understand the risks associated with vaping and make informed choices in a landscape where messaging is often mixed.

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References

International Multiple Sclerosis Month

For more information, please visit: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/multiple-sclerosis/symptoms-causes/syc-20350269>

World Hypertension Day 17 May

To find out more, please visit: <https://www.who.int/southeastasia/news/detail/17-05-2025-world-hypertension-day>

World No Tobacco Day 31 May 2026

- For more information, please visit: <https://cansa.org.za/>
- [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(24\)00549-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(24)00549-2/fulltext)
- <https://satfyf.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SATFYF-FACT-SHEET-Final-Copy-30-May.pdf>

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