Although cardiovascular diseases typically occur in middle age or later, risk factors are determined to a great extent by behaviours learned in childhood and continued into adulthood, such as dietary habits and smoking. Throughout the world, these risks are starting to appear earlier. Risks are starting to appear markedly in adolescence, increased substantially, not only in Europe and North America, but also in traditionally slender populations such as the Chinese previously rare in children, but is increasing in adolescents in, for example, North America, Japan and Thailand.

Markers of CVD can be seen in young children. Post-mortems of children who died in accidents have found fatty streaks and fibrous plaques in the coronary arteries. These early lesions of atherosclerosis were most frequently found in children whose risk factors included smoking, elevated plasma lipids, high blood pressure and obesity.

Programmes to address childhood and youth risk factors are mostly confined to developed countries, but urgent action is required worldwide. Families, schools, communities, health professionals, public health officials and policy-makers all need to promote healthy lifestyles in children and young people. Unless the spread of risk factors is stemmed, the world faces an epidemic of CVD.