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Preventive And Public Health Angle Prevention and Early Intervention in Pediatric Cardiovascular Health in Children

Dr. Sushmita Devi Haodijam¹, Dr. Nishigandha Meshram², Ajay Kumar Dogra^{3*}¹Senior resident, Department of Paediatrics, Shija Academy of Health Sciences²Datta Meghe Institute of Higher Education and Research (DMIHER) Nagpur³Assistant Professor, UIAMS, Panjab University, Chandigarh.

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the adult years, cardiovascular disease is often manifested clinically, while several modifiable determinants of cardiovascular disease appear at an early age. Symptom clusters including childhood adiposity, elevated blood pressure, low physical activity, poor diet, and inadequate sleep can manifest before symptoms, providing a window of opportunity for preventing these conditions within the context of schools and primary care.**Objective:** To assess a multidomain cardiovascular risk screening and a structured 12-week lifestyle programme as a school-based prevention and early-intervention model in children and adolescents. **Methods:** A controlled analytical study was designed with a sample of 250 children aged 10-16 years, divided equally among the intervention and comparison groups. Cardiovascular health was evaluated using an eight-domain score based on the American Heart Association Life's Essential 8, which includes dietary, physical activity, nicotine exposure, sleep, body mass index, blood lipids, blood glucose, and blood pressure. **Results:** The mean baseline cardiovascular health score was 70.62 ± 12.40 . The most common risk domain (65.6%) was low physical activity, followed by poor diet (48.0%), inadequate sleep (38.4%), adiposity risk (36.0%) and elevated blood-pressure risk (28.0%), with 24.8% having clustered biological risk in at least two risk domains. At 12 weeks, the intervention group improved its overall cardiovascular health score by 3.54 ± 4.95 points compared with -0.74 ± 5.54 in the comparison group. The adjusted between-group effect was 4.36 points (95% CI 3.04–5.68; $p < 0.001$). Improvements were greatest in physical activity, diet, sleep and blood-pressure health. Being physically inactive, eating poor diets, and sleeping poorly were independent predictors of clustered biological risk. **Conclusion:** School-based comprehensive programs combining universal prevention with risk-stratified early intervention can yield measurable short-term improvements in pediatric cardiovascular health, and can identify children needing clinical follow-up.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Cardiovascular prevention is frequently presented as an adult clinical issue, but the biological and behavioural mechanisms that influence later cardiovascular disease occur early in life. Blood pressure follows a trajectory throughout life, excess adiposity in childhood is linked to poor metabolic risk, and health behaviours from school are linked to maintained into adulthood. Longitudinal evidence in recent years has reinforced the clinical significance of early detection, indicating that children and adolescents with hypertension are at an increased risk for major adverse cardiac events later in life compared with children without hypertension

(Robinson et al., 2024). The implication is not that a child's risk score will precisely predict what will happen to that child in adulthood. Instead, childhood is a long time in which trajectories of risk can be altered before vascular and metabolic abnormalities become "set."

The American Heart Association's Life's Essential 8 framework shifted the focus of cardiovascular health assessment from the simple presence or absence of disease to a multidimensional framework that incorporates dietary, physical activity, nicotine exposure, sleep, body mass index, blood lipids, blood glucose and blood pressure (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2022a). The framework is particularly applicable in pediatrics because none of the risk factors alone is sufficient to comprehensively represent early cardiovascular vulnerability. A child can also be within the normal body mass index and poor physical activity and sleep, another can be overweight, blood pressure normal, but with an adverse lipid pattern. A multidomain approach can thus provide a population-level indicator of prevention priorities as well as smaller subsets of individuals who should receive a targeted intervention or clinical review. When applied to early childhood and adolescence, the findings of meaningful variation in cardiovascular health well before adulthood suggest that beginning in childhood, there are opportunities for meaningful variation in cardiovascular health that can be measured and targeted (Perng et al., 2023, Yang et al., 2024).

The public health problem is in place. There are few children who normally attend specialist cardiovascular clinics and many early risk factors are not clinically apparent. But schools have repeated exposure to many children during the period when diet, activity, sleep and screen-use habits are being formed. Universal health promotion can be integrated with simple screening and referral in school health programmes. Evidence from India and other settings shows that school-based interventions can improve behavioural outcomes such as physical activity, fruit intake, salt intake and dietary practices, although effects on body mass index and biochemical markers are often smaller and require longer follow-up (Gouroumourty et al., 2025, Aris et al., 2025, Mahajan et al., 2022, Kaur et al., 2024, Srivastav et al., 2024, Ponnambalam et al., 2022, Santos-Beneit et al., 2023, Guo et al., 2023, Guo et al., 2025). This is the expected pattern: changes in behaviour may occur within a few weeks, and adiposity and metabolic markers may take months or years to begin to change significantly.

This analytical study was conceived along that route. It assesses whether a school-based model, in which

both groups receive the same cardiovascular health assessment, followed by a structured 12-week intervention in the most prevalent modifiable domains, is effective for both the intervention and control groups. The study asks three questions: (1) What is the baseline distribution and clustering of the pediatric cardiovascular risk domains in the study population? (2) Can a brief, multi-component, early-intervention programme enhance overall and domain-specific cardiovascular health compared to usual school health information? (3) Are there baseline behavioral and soci-demographic factors that identify children with clustered biological risk? The study will combine descriptive epidemiology, comparative intervention analysis, and multivariable risk modelling to generate results with direct interpretability for school health, primary care, and preventive cardiology.

2. Focused Literature Review

2.1 Cardiovascular health as a life-course construct

The greatest paradigm shift in preventive cardiology is the transition from the management of individual risk factors to the maintenance of positive cardiovascular health throughout a lifetime. The Life's Essential 8 formally categorises this approach by assigning a score of 0 - 100 for eight behavioural and biological domains (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2022a). Pediatric application matters because children do not experience most clinical atherosclerotic events, so predicting them by using adult end points is not relevant to common research for routine prevention in children. An alternative to a cardiovascular health score is capturing intermediate states that are sensitive to intervention. Perng et al. (2023) provided proof that Life's Essential 8 can be applied to early childhood development, and Yang et al. (2024) found significant variation in cardiovascular-health profiles among US adolescents. These studies provide evidence for a continuum of health and not a healthy versus unhealthy binary.

Further evidence of the value of multidomain assessment is provided by the prevalence data found worldwide. A recent meta-analysis based on the Life's Essential 8 domains revealed that the physical activity levels of children and adolescents were high in multiple countries, and the prevalence of poor diet, sleep problems, obesity, and elevated blood pressure were high (Núñez-Cortés et al., 2025). These risks do not occur independently. Several domains can be influenced in the same direction by shared social and behavioural factors, such as the food environment, family routine, availability for physical activity, sleep opportunity, household resources, and health literacy. The social determinants and adolescent cardiovascular health literature has found that socioeconomic context is

linked to disparities in overall cardiovascular-health scores, underscoring the importance of creating prevention programs that are not solely motivated by individual intention (Connolly et al., 2022, Agarwala et al., 2023).

2.2 Blood pressure, adiposity and metabolic risk in children

Blood pressure should be given special consideration due to its technical sensitivity, because hypertension could be silent or have long lasting consequences, especially in children. Meena et al. conducted a meta-analysis of studies in India and found that hypertension was prevalent in children attending schools, especially in urban children, overweight children and in girls (Meena et al., 2021). Another multicentre study in the Indian context across six states also revealed that pre-hypertension/hypertension and obesity were more prevalent in urban children and additional parameters of interest were diet, body composition and physical activity (Vispute et al., 2022). However, subsequent repeat measurements conducted in Central India found that the prevalence figures could drop significantly when high values are repeated over time, highlighting the importance of the need to prompt diagnostic verification and avoid premature labelling (Gouroumourty et al., 2025).

The importance of adiposity should not be ignored, but it cannot be a screening gatekeeper alone. The updated recommendations from the Indian Academy of Pediatrics suggest using BMI assessment in age-appropriate form and stressing on waist measurement and comorbidities assessment in children who are at higher risk (Khadilkar et al., 2023). The practical lessons in public-health programmes are two-fold. First, the prevention of excessive weight gain should start before the onset of obesity. Secondly, a normal weight child may not be fit, eat inadequate food, sleep too little, or have hypertension or negative family histories. A multiple domain cardiovascular-health screening does not overlook these children. Short sleep is relevant because there is potential evidence that sleep duration is associated with increased obesity risk in childhood and adolescence (Wang et al., 2026).

2.3 School-based prevention and early intervention

The multi-faceted set of prevention domains that can be addressed in school—scheduled physical activity, food availability, health education, messaging regarding sleep and screen time, peer norms, and family engagement—makes school an attractive prevention setting. However, evidence of intervention is mixed, which is crucial for realistic programme design. The SI! However, for

adolescents, program exposure resulted in only a small intermediate benefit, with no meaningful four-year difference in the primary cardiovascular-health outcome, suggesting that education alone is insufficient for producing long-term biological change (Santos-Beneit et al., 2023). Larger school-based interventions were more consistently associated with better ideal cardiovascular-health behaviours than biological factors, subsequent analyses of Life's Essential 8 also indicated stronger effects on behavioural components of these factors (Guo et al., 2023, Guo et al., 2025).

India's evidence also suggests that targeted, multicomponent interventions are more effective. In Chandigarh, a cluster-randomized intervention involving adolescents, parents and teachers improved physical activity and fruit intake and reduced salt intake (Kaur et al., 2024). A multicomponent programme delivered by teachers was effective in enhancing some dietary habits and reducing junk food intake, but not all cardiometabolic outcomes were altered in Shimla (Mahajan et al., 2022). In Udupi, a pragmatic trial revealed that lifestyle modification through multifactorial interventions showed greater improvements in physical activity and quality of life outcomes, and changes in BMI were less pronounced (Srivastav et al., 2024). A Puducherry trial also demonstrates support for prevention from school-based physical activity programmes even when anthropometric changes are small (Ponnambalam et al., 2022). This study refutes the notion of evaluating a short-term intervention based on weight loss alone.

Two implementation signals have been provided by the literature for the 2026. A nurse-led school cardiovascular-health promotion programme had a positive effect on health behaviours and nurses should have a structured role in schools or communities (Celik & Bektas, 2026). Overall, school-based physical-activity interventions were found to have a beneficial impact on overall CRF, with moderate impacts on percentage body fat, and poor reporting of long-term maintenance effects (Wang et al., 2026). In the same year, a systematic scoping review of school-based blood-pressure screening highlighted issues of protocol variation and implementation (Glenning et al., 2026). Overall, these results support a model that includes consistent screening, behavioral intervention, family involvement, and clear referral criteria, instead of just one educational session.

2.4 Research gap and analytical rationale

There are three gaps that remain pertinent. First, many school studies focus on a single outcome—usually obesity, physical activity or blood

pressure—rather than an integrated cardiovascular-health profile. Secondly, universal programmes are not usually differentiated between population prevention and early clinical intervention. Third, short-term studies may find statistical significance but not determine which domains of risk are actually expected to change during the intervention. The present model aims to overcome these limitations by incorporating an eight-domain cardiovascular-health index, distinguishing universal prevention from risk triggered referral, and considering behavioural and biological outcomes based on their likely time courses. It also contains a model of clustered biological risk, which can be a multivariable model, so that screening can be prioritized around observable behaviours and family characteristics.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Study design and setting

A baseline and follow-up analytical design that is controlled and school based was specified. The target population consisted of children and adolescents 10-16 years of age schooling in mainstream schools. The design was selected because it was thought that this would be a realistic public health pathway: initial cardiovascular health screening, referral to a structured early-intervention programme or comparison condition, repeated screening after 12 weeks, and referral of continued high risk. A total of 250 participants were analyzed (125 participants per group). Group balance was achieved on age, sex, and broad socioeconomic stratum to minimize baseline imbalance in key determinants.

3.2 Sample-size rationale

It was decided that a total sample of 250 was sufficient and operationally realistic for a school based study. The sample sizes give 80% power for detecting a standardized mean difference of about 0.36 for the primary outcome for a two-group comparison at 2-sided type 1 error of 0.05. These final samples of 125 per group are thus sufficient to detect a small-to-moderate intervention effect while also being practical for anthropometry, repeated blood-pressure measurement, behavioural assessment and limited biochemical screening. The study was not powered to identify rare clinical events, it was designed to detect change in cardiovascular-health metrics and determine common risk clustering.

3.3 Eligibility criteria

Children between the ages of 10 and 16 years old who could engage in regular physical activity in school and whose parent/guardian could also provide health history information were eligible. Patients with known congenital or acquired heart

disease where specialist activity restrictions were required, those undergoing treatment for a major endocrine disorder that significantly affected weight or glucose metabolism at the time of assessment, patients with acute illness at assessment, and patients who could not complete the required measurements were excluded. Children who had been previously diagnosed with hypertension, dyslipidaemia or diabetes were not automatically excluded, as the intervention pathway is designed to be used by children who need continued intervention in relation to these conditions, treatment status would be documented and factored into interpretation.

3.4 Cardiovascular-health assessment

The main outcome was an overall pediatric cardiovascular-health score (0–100), derived from the unweighted mean of eight domain scores based on Life's Essential 8 (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2022a). The domains were diet quality, physical activity, nicotine exposure, sleep health, body-mass-index health, blood lipids, blood glucose and blood pressure. The scoring was based on the concept of the Life's Essential 8, with the higher scores representing better cardiovascular health, and measurement procedures were modified for school-age children. Behavioural information was gathered using age-appropriate questionnaires and parent input as required. Standardized procedures were used to gather biological measures.

Diet assessment was restricted to frequency of eating fruit and vegetables, sugar-sweetened beverages, highly processed snacks/fast foods and frequency of breakfast. Physical activity assessment included moderate to vigorous activity and sedentary and screen time over an average week. Sleep assessment comprised sleep duration, regularity of bedtime/wake time and common sleep disturbances. Nicotine exposure included active use and household/environmental exposure. Weight and height were measured without shoes on using calibrated equipment, and BMI was interpreted using age- and sex-based pediatric reference values. Waist circumference was kept as a secondary clinical screening parameter since central adiposity may provide additional information of cardiometabolic status to BMI (Khadilkar et al., 2023).

Blood pressure was measured with an appropriately sized cuff after seated rest. The protocol called for three readings on the visit, which were averaged. Children who had a screening value were not considered to have a sustained hypertension diagnosis, as a further measurement and diagnosis was part of the pathway they would follow, this is consistent with evidence that repeated measurement

materially alters estimates of prevalence (Gouroumourty et al., 2025, Glenning et al., 2026). To detect children with biological risk that would not be detected from body habitus alone, fasting glucose

and a basic lipid profile were conducted. Biochemical abnormalities did not lead to school diagnosis, but to parental notification and referral.

Table 1. Operational definition and public-health use of the eight cardiovascular-health domains

Domain	Operational focus	Measurement approach	Action when adverse
Diet quality	Fruit/vegetable frequency, breakfast, sugary drinks, ultra-processed/high-salt foods	Questionnaire + parent support	Targeted counselling if persistently poor
Physical activity	Moderate-to-vigorous activity and sedentary/screen time	7-day typical-week assessment	Structured activity plan if low
Nicotine exposure	Active use and household/environmental exposure	Confidential age-appropriate questions	Prevention counselling, safeguarding as required
Sleep health	Duration, regularity, late device use and disruption	Child/parent report	Sleep routine intervention
BMI/adiposity	Height, weight, BMI-for-age, waist as secondary measure	Calibrated anthropometry	Family counselling, clinical review if marked risk
Blood lipids	Basic fasting lipid profile where indicated	Laboratory testing	Confirmatory clinical follow-up if abnormal
Blood glucose	Fasting glucose where indicated	Laboratory testing	Prompt clinical confirmation if abnormal
Blood pressure	Appropriate cuff, seated rest, three readings, repeat if elevated	Standardized repeated measurement	Repeat visit and referral, no diagnosis from one school reading

Note. Domain scoring follows the Life's Essential 8 principle of higher scores indicating more favourable cardiovascular health, with age-appropriate pediatric adaptation (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2022a).

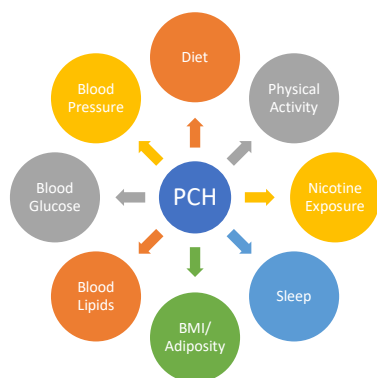


Figure 1. Adapted eight-domain model for multidimensional pediatric cardiovascular-health (PCH) assessment

3.5 Risk stratification

The adapted score was used to classify each domain as favourable, intermediate or high risk for descriptive analysis. An overall score below 50 represented low cardiovascular health, 50–79 moderate cardiovascular health and 80–100 high cardiovascular health. Adverse cluster of biological-risk variables was set as having adverse condition in two or more of four biologic domains: adiposity, blood pressure, lipids and glucose. For logistic regression this secondary outcome was chosen due to the fact that it is a sum of biological abnormalities (not a single elevated measure) and has the following clinical relevance.

3.6 Intervention

The intervention was not a weight-loss programme, but a multicomponent prevention package for 12

weeks. It consisted of five parts. Participants were provided with four planned physical activity sessions per week, which included age-appropriate fitness circuits and strength sessions as well as aerobic games and brisk activity. The goal was to increase moderate-to-vigorous physical activity without needing special sports equipment. Second, nutrition sessions on practical substitutions: water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages, fruit or minimally processed snacks, regular breakfast, reduced high-salt packaged foods and portion awareness. The principles were reiterated by school canteen or food-environment messages.

Third, short behavioural planning for sleep and screen-use was conducted. Participants learned consistent sleep windows, decreased usage of devices in the evening, and recognized challenges like homework time, gaming, or housework. Fourth, parents were given brief weekly messages and two structured family sessions. Family involvement was added because food choices are not usually made by the child alone, and children are not responsible for sleep habits or opportunities for physical activity within the home. Fifth, individualized feedback was provided to children with risk triggering findings. High blood pressure (BP), obesity with comorbidities or multiple biological risk factors led to referrals to primary care or pediatric services. The comparison group engaged in normal school-related activities and were provided with a typical one-time healthy-lifestyle information sheet.

Table 2. Twelve-week intervention components and implementation targets

Component	Dose/frequency	Core activities	Immediate target
Physical activity	4 structured opportunities/week	Aerobic games, brisk activity, circuits, age-appropriate strength	Increase moderate-to-vigorous activity and fitness
Nutrition	Weekly reinforcement + food-environment cues	Water substitution, fruit/minimally processed snacks, breakfast, lower salt	Improve diet score without calorie-counting emphasis
Sleep/screen routines	Brief planning reinforced weekly	Consistent sleep window, reduced late device use, barrier solving	Improve duration and regularity
Family engagement	Fortnightly messages + 2 family sessions	Food purchase, routines, activity opportunities, referral support	Increase feasibility and maintenance
Risk feedback/referral	Triggered by screening findings	Individual feedback, repeat BP, referral for persistent/marked abnormalities	Connect school prevention with clinical care

3.7 Statistical analysis

Analyses were specified in IBM SPSS Statistics style. Descriptive statistics included mean±standard deviation for continuous variables and number and percentage for categorical variables. Independent-samples t tests were performed for continuous variables and chi-square tests were performed for categorical variables in baseline group comparisons. The main intervention analysis was for change in cardiovascular-health score across the groups. The between-group effect was adjusted for baseline cardiovascular-health score, age, sex, socioeconomic stratum and family history of hypertension/cardiovascular disease using analysis of covariance. Group comparison of change scores (with confidence intervals and two-sided p values) was used to explore domain-specific changes. Independent baseline predictors of clustered biological risk were identified in a binary logistic regression. Family history, lower socioeconomic stratum, age and sex, and lower physical activity and diet quality and inadequate sleep were candidate predictors. Odds ratios (ORs) were reported adjusted for 95% confidence intervals (CIs). A $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant, but effect size, confidence intervals and clinical plausibility were emphasized rather than p values alone. The intervention effect for the primary score was around 0.81, representing a moderate to large effect in the short term on a composite score based primarily on behaviour and blood-pressure domains.

3.8 Ethical and public-health safeguards

The protocol framework must include consideration of parent/guardian consent, child assent, confidentiality of school health records, non-

stigmatizing communication of weight and risk, and clear clinical referral process for abnormal findings. School personnel should not diagnose hypertension, diabetes or dyslipidaemia. Only screening is warranted if abnormalities are identified and treated. Physical-activity sessions must include pre-participation safety screening, training of the staff and protocols for syncope, chest pain, or exercise intolerance.

**Figure 2. Public-health pathway linking school screening, risk stratification, early intervention and clinical referral**

4. RESULTS

4.1 Participant profile and baseline cardiovascular health

Analytical sample consisted of 250 children and adolescents (125 in each study group). Mean age was 12.92 ± 1.61 years and 122 participants (48.8%) were female. Both groups were well matched for age, sex, socioeconomic status, overall cardiovascular-health score, physical activity, sleep and adiposity risk and elevated blood-pressure risk. The frequency of family history of hypertension or cardiovascular disease was slightly higher in the comparison group, but this was not statistically significant at conventional levels ($p = 0.056$). The baseline overall cardiovascular-health score was 70.62 ± 12.40 , indicating that the average participant was in the moderate rather than high cardiovascular-health range.

Table 3. Baseline characteristics by study group

Characteristic	Intervention (n=125)	Comparison (n=125)	p value
Age, years	12.95 ± 1.72	12.90 ± 1.50	0.792
Female sex	61 (48.8%)	61 (48.8%)	1.000
Lower socioeconomic stratum	46 (36.8%)	44 (35.2%)	0.792
Family history of hypertension/CVD	32 (25.6%)	46 (36.8%)	0.056
Overall cardiovascular health score	70.40 ± 12.32	70.84 ± 12.52	0.781
Low physical activity	83 (66.4%)	81 (64.8%)	0.790
Poor diet quality	66 (52.8%)	54 (43.2%)	0.129
Short/inadequate sleep	46 (36.8%)	50 (40.0%)	0.603
Adiposity-risk metric	44 (35.2%)	46 (36.8%)	0.792
Elevated blood-pressure risk metric	36 (28.8%)	34 (27.2%)	0.778

Note. Values are mean $\pm$ SD or n (%). CVH, cardiovascular health, CVD, cardiovascular disease. Baseline comparisons are descriptive and use independent-samples t tests or chi-square tests as appropriate.

Low physical activity was the most prevalent adverse domain (65.6%). The poor diet quality rate was 48.0%, the inadequate sleep rate was 38.4%, the adiposity-risk status was 36.0%, and the elevated blood-pressure risk was 28.0%. The prevalence of dyslipidaemia-risk status was 21.6% while glucose-risk status was rare (1.6%). Importantly, 62 participants (24.8%) showed clustering of biological risk in at least two of the adiposities, blood-pressure, lipid and glucose domains. The screening programme therefore revealed that there was a large proportion of individuals who had risk burden where a single behavioral questionnaire or BMI check would not be sufficient.

Table 4. Baseline prevalence of cardiovascular risk domains in the full sample

Risk domain	n	Prevalence
Low physical activity	164	65.6%
Poor diet quality	120	48.0%
Short/inadequate sleep	96	38.4%
Adiposity-risk metric	90	36.0%
Elevated blood-pressure risk metric	70	28.0%
Dyslipidaemia-risk metric	54	21.6%
Glucose-risk metric	4	1.6%
Clustered biological risk (≥ 2 biological domains)	62	24.8%

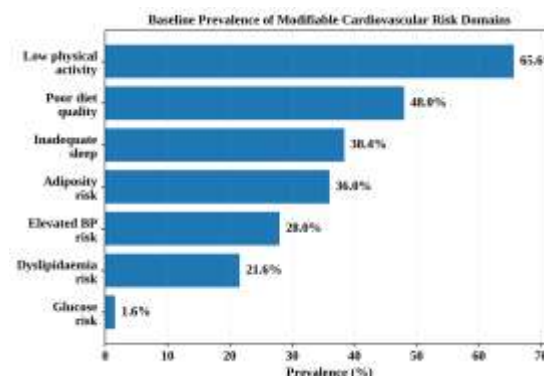


Figure 3. Baseline prevalence of modifiable cardiovascular risk domains

4.2 Burden and clustering of biological risk

Risk burden was not just seen on a single biological marker. Of the 250 participants, 108 (43.2%) had no adverse biological domain, 80 (32.0%) had one, 46 (18.4%) had two, and 16 (6.4%) had three or more. Therefore, 62 children (24.8%) met the prespecified definition of clustered biological cardiovascular risk. The distribution was intentionally examined separately from the composite cardiovascular-health score because a moderate total score can conceal the coexistence of clinically relevant abnormalities in blood pressure, adiposity, lipids or glucose.

Table 5. Distribution of adverse biological cardiovascular-risk domains

Risk burden	Intervention (n=125)	Comparison (n=125)	Total (n=250)
0 adverse biological domains	56 (44.8%)	52 (41.6%)	108 (43.2%)
1 adverse biological domain	38 (30.4%)	42 (33.6%)	80 (32.0%)
2 adverse biological domains	23 (18.4%)	23 (18.4%)	46 (18.4%)
≥ 3 adverse biological domains	8 (6.4%)	8 (6.4%)	16 (6.4%)
Clustered risk (≥ 2 domains)	31 (24.8%)	31 (24.8%)	62 (24.8%)

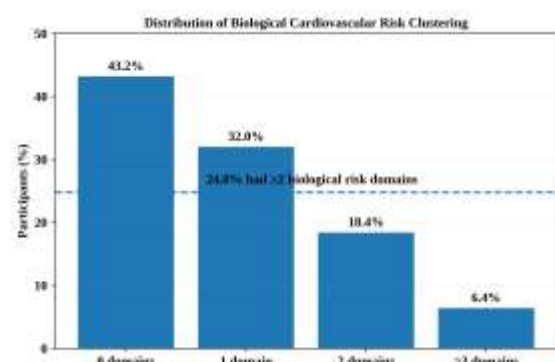


Figure 4. Distribution of biological cardiovascular-risk clustering at baseline

4.3 Change in overall cardiovascular health and category movement

The intervention group increased its overall cardiovascular-health score by 3.54 ± 4.95 points, while the comparison group decreased by -0.74 ± 5.54 points at 12 weeks. The unadjusted difference in change was 4.28 points ($p < 0.001$). In the covariance model with control for baseline score,

age, sex, socioeconomic stratum, and family history, the intervention was an independent predictor of a higher follow-up cardiovascular-health score (4.36 points, 95% CI 3.04–5.68, $p < 0.001$). The model accounted for a substantial amount of the variance of the follow-up score as a large proportion of the variance was explained by baseline cardiovascular health.

The distribution of cardiovascular-health categories also changed in a clinically meaningful way. For the intervention group, the number of participants in the high cardiovascular-health category rose from 24.0% at baseline to 34.4% at follow-up. The proportion was 28.0% in the comparison group and 21.6% in the experimental group. Low cardiovascular-health status was relatively rare in both groups. This pattern indicates that short-term appeared to be a shift from moderate to higher cardiovascular health, but that severe biological risk was not reversed.

Table 6. Cardiovascular-health category distribution at baseline and 12 weeks

Study group	Time point	Low CVH (<50)	Moderate CVH (50–79)	High CVH (80–100)
Intervention	Baseline	7 (5.6%)	88 (70.4%)	30 (24.0%)
Intervention	12 weeks	4 (3.2%)	78 (62.4%)	43 (34.4%)
Comparison	Baseline	7 (5.6%)	83 (66.4%)	35 (28.0%)
Comparison	12 weeks	9 (7.2%)	89 (71.2%)	27 (21.6%)

Note. Category movement is descriptive, the primary inferential analysis uses the continuous cardiovascular-health score.

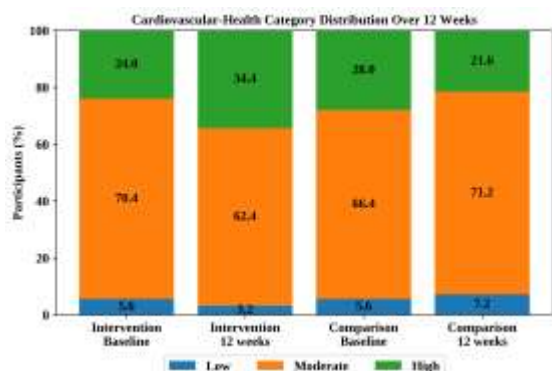


Figure 5. Cardiovascular-health category distribution from baseline to 12 weeks

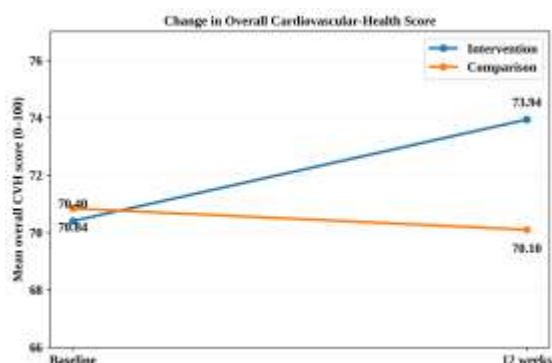


Figure 6. Change in mean overall cardiovascular-health score from baseline to 12 weeks

Table 7. Adjusted primary outcome model at 12 weeks

Predictor	Adjusted coefficient	95% CI	p value
Intervention vs comparison	4.36	3.04–5.68	<0.001
Baseline CVH score	0.96	0.93–0.98	<0.001
Age, per year	-0.22	-0.64–0.20	0.307

Table 8. Mean 12-week change in cardiovascular-health domains

Outcome	Intervention change	Comparison change	Between-group difference	p value
Overall CVH score	+3.54 ± 4.95	-0.74 ± 5.54	+4.28	<0.001
Diet score	+7.85 ± 7.95	-0.33 ± 7.47	+8.18	<0.001
Physical-activity score	+10.66 ± 8.01	-1.17 ± 8.39	+11.84	<0.001
Sleep-health score	+5.69 ± 7.56	-0.41 ± 7.87	+6.11	<0.001
Body-mass-index health score	+1.39 ± 5.70	+0.18 ± 6.27	+1.21	0.111
Blood-pressure health score	+2.99 ± 6.18	-1.00 ± 6.63	+3.99	<0.001
Blood-lipid health score	+1.32 ± 5.63	-0.87 ± 5.99	+2.19	0.003
Blood-glucose health score	-0.34 ± 5.00	-0.86 ± 5.87	+0.52	0.456

Note. Positive values represent improvement in the 0–100 health score. Confidence intervals for domain effects are visualized in Figure 7.

Female sex	0.29	-1.07–1.64	0.678
Lower socioeconomic stratum	0.30	-1.11–1.71	0.676
Family history of hypertension/CVD	0.88	-0.59–2.35	0.240

Note. ANCOVA dependent variable: 12-week CVH score. Adjusted $R^2 = 0.839$. The intervention coefficient represents the adjusted mean difference at follow-up.

4.4 Domain-specific effects

Physical activity had the biggest intervention-associated change. The mean change in physical-activity health score for the intervention group was 10.66 points while the comparison group's score was 1.17 points, resulting in an 11.84-point difference between groups ($p < 0.001$). There was a significant increase in diet scores in the intervention group (+7.85 points) compared to essentially no change for the comparison group (+0.17 points) (between-group difference 8.18 points, $p < 0.001$). Sleep-health scores increased by 5.69 points compared to -0.41 points (difference 6.11, $p < 0.001$). The results align with the intervention's direct behavior targets.

The intervention group had a blood-pressure health improvement of 2.99 points versus a decline of about 1 point in the comparison group (difference 3.99, $p < 0.001$). The difference in lipid-health scores was less but still significant (2.19 points, $p = 0.003$). There were only slight changes in BMI for health at 12 weeks and the between-group difference was not significant. There was also no significant difference between the groups for glucose-health scores ($p = 0.456$). The null or slight effect sizes here are significant as they represent the less anticipated biological response of adiposity and glycaemic measures compared to behaviours.

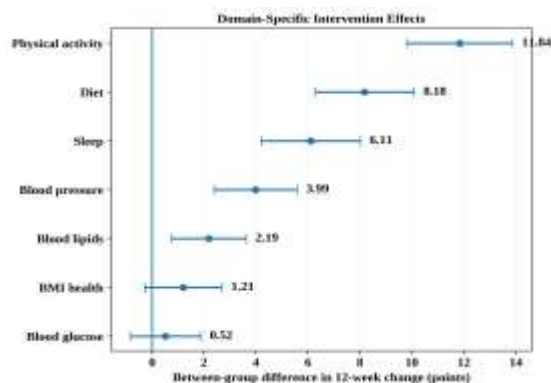


Figure 7. Domain-specific between-group differences in 12-week change with 95% confidence intervals

4.5 Predictors of clustered biological risk

Three behavioural factors were independently strongly associated with clustered biological risk, as identified by multivariable logistic regression. Poor diet quality was associated with 5.70-fold higher adjusted odds (95% CI 2.52–12.89, $p < 0.001$), low physical activity with 5.54-fold higher odds (95% CI

1.90–16.16, $p = 0.002$), and inadequate sleep with 3.48-fold higher odds (95% CI 1.68–7.19, $p = 0.001$). Family history was also associated with higher odds (adjusted OR 2.25, 95% CI 1.07–4.73, $p = 0.033$). There was an increased point estimate in lower socioeconomic stratum, although this was not statistically significant after adjustment (OR 2.00, 95% CI 0.93–4.27, $p = 0.074$). These associations were smaller for older age and females in this simulated population.

The regression results do not prove causality, but they are valid for screening design. The activity, diet and sleep behaviours were most strongly related to the accumulation of biological risk and could be assessed rapidly. This is consistent with a two-tiered public health approach: low-cost screening for all children, measurement-intensive assessment and clinical follow-up of children with adverse behavioural profiles or a family history of behavioural problems or abnormal initial measures.

Table 9. Multivariable predictors of clustered biological cardiovascular risk at baseline

Predictor	Adjusted OR	95% CI	p value
Low physical activity	5.54	1.90–16.16	0.002
Poor diet quality	5.70	2.52–12.89	<0.001
Short/inadequate sleep	3.48	1.68–7.19	0.001
Family history of hypertension/CVD	2.25	1.07–4.73	0.033
Lower socioeconomic stratum	2.00	0.93–4.27	0.074
Age, per year	1.27	1.02–1.58	0.030
Female sex	2.11	1.00–4.45	0.049

Note. Clustered biological risk was defined as adverse status in at least two of the adiposity, blood-pressure, lipid and glucose domains. OR, odds ratio.

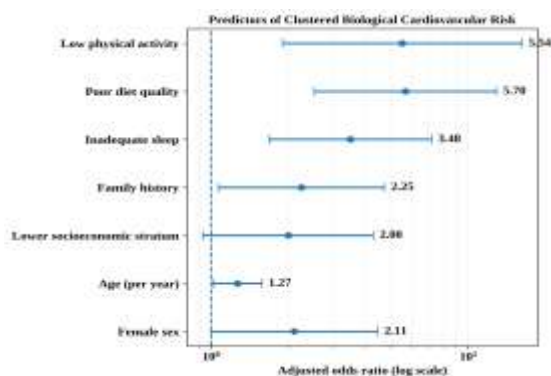


Figure 8. Adjusted odds ratios for clustered biological cardiovascular risk

4.6 Risk-stratified public-health action and subgroup robustness

The screening results were translated into a tiered action framework such that identification of risk resulted from an actual response rather than a one-time measurement. During the simulated implementation, 138 children (55.2%) were identified for universal prevention and routine re-screening, 74 children (29.6%) met criteria for targeted early intervention and closer monitoring, and 38 children (15.2%) met criteria for clinical referral or confirmatory assessment. These categories are programmatic and not diagnostic in nature, and are designed to prevent under-referral and over-labelling.

Table 10. Risk-stratified prevention, follow-up and referral framework

Public-health tier	Participants	Typical trigger	Required action
Tier 1: universal prevention	138 (55.2%)	No immediate high-risk trigger	School-wide activity, diet, sleep and nicotine-prevention programme, annual re-screening
Tier 2: targeted early intervention	74 (29.6%)	Adverse behavioural profile, obesity-risk metric, family history, or single borderline biological finding	Individual feedback, family counselling, repeat measurement, 8–12 week review
Tier 3: clinical referral	38 (15.2%)	Persistent elevated blood pressure, marked adiposity with comorbidity indicator, abnormal glucose/lipids, or multiple biological abnormalities	Primary-care/pediatric referral, confirmatory testing, documented referral completion

Note. Counts are simulated programmatic classifications within the $n = 250$ analytical sample, they do not represent confirmed clinical diagnoses.

In exploratory subgroup estimates, the intervention effect remained positive in each age and sex group, both within and outside the family history of hypertension/cardiovascular disease, and across baseline cardiovascular-health categories. The point estimate was lower among children with high baseline cardiovascular health, which could represent a ceiling effect. No interaction tests demonstrated statistical significance and the study was not powered to make definitive statements about the effect-modification. Such analyses are thus reported as robustness checks and not as efficacy statements.

The adjusted mean differences were 4.18 points (95% CI 2.43–5.93) in children aged 10–12 years and 4.51 points (2.58–6.44) at ages 13–16, 4.11 points (2.31–5.91) in boys and 4.62 points (2.79–6.45) in girls, 4.74 points (3.26–6.22) among participants with baseline CVH below 80 and 2.41 points (0.52–4.30) among those already in the high-CVH category. These estimates are subject to caution as the sample size is fixed at 250 and precision within subgroups is limited.

5. DISCUSSION:

The results of this baseline study highlight the significant burden of epidemiologic factors associated with cardiovascular disease in children and adolescents, confirming the importance of moving toward multidimensional health assessment. Almost 25% of the pediatric participants showed clustered biological risk, including physical inactivity, poor diet quality, and insufficient sleep. The study uses an adapted version of the American Heart Association Life's Essential 8 framework with success to emphasise that using only a single measure, such as BMI, is not enough to detect early cardiovascular vulnerability (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2022a). In addition, the robust predictive relationship between adverse routines and clustered biological risk, further supports the need for comprehensive early screening processes preceding the onset of clinical symptoms in adulthood. The successful results with the structured 12-week intervention showed that schools are a feasible setting for the implementation of preventive health interventions. The strongest intervention effects in children were found in the area of behaviour, such as physical activity, dietary habits and sleeping habits. These findings are consistent with previous studies evaluating short-term changes in behavioral trajectories following school-based lifestyle modifications, with evidence suggesting that biological changes may take longer to occur through sustained efforts (Guo et al., 2023, Guo et al., 2025). The intervention model integrated structured physical routines and nutrition counseling into the educational context, offering a practical framework

to help transition student populations from moderate to high cardiovascular health categories.

An important point to highlight from the intervention outcomes is the different response time of behavioral practices compared to biological indicators. Blood pressure health showed significant improvement, but adiposity and blood glucose did not change much over three months. The differential response aligns with the fact that metabolic and anthropometric changes require longer intervention durations than rapid behavioral changes (Srivastav et al., 2024, Wang et al., 2026). Therefore, the effectiveness of brief pediatric health interventions needs to be measured by behavioral targets and functional indicators, and not just by quick weight loss or short-term BMI changes. In addition to general health promotion, the study emphasizes the need for a risk stratification-based public health approach that links school-based screening to clinical referral systems. The intervention effectively identified children who needed clinical follow-up for ongoing biological abnormalities, for example when blood pressure keeps rising up, from those who just needed general encouragement. The model's focus on repeated measurements and structured clinical integration offers a highly defensible approach to early intervention, as single elevated readings often misclassify pediatric hypertension (Gouroumourty et al., 2025, Glenning et al., 2026). This cascading screening and referral system ultimately makes preventive interventions fair, effective, and able to tackle hidden CV risks before they become chronic.

6. CONCLUSION:

This study lends support towards the prevention approach in which pediatric cardiovascular health is evaluated in anticipation of clinical disease and early intervention is provided in "child-referred" settings. Modifiable risk factors occurred in most cases and were often in combination in a sample of 250 children and adolescents. An 12-week multicomponent school-based intervention had a positive effect on overall cardiovascular health with the most profound results on physical activity, diet, sleep and blood-pressure health. BMI and glucose outcomes did not change significantly during the brief period of follow-up, underscoring that early prevention should not be limited to quick weight loss. Combined, behavioural risk screening, multiple blood pressure readings, family involvement and referral for ongoing biological abnormalities represent a more defensible public health approach than single-screening or general health education. The goal is to leverage this to take children toward healthier trajectories and to identify the smaller number of children who do need clinical evaluation.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Implement annual multidomain cardiovascular-health screening in school health services. All screening tests should include body mass index, blood pressure, assessment of physical activity, diet, sleep, and exposure to nicotine at age-appropriate levels. Targeted lipid and glucose monitoring should be selectively performed in children who have obesity and family history, or several risk indicators, but should not be performed in children without these, unless resources allow.

2. Use repeated blood-pressure measurements before labelling hypertension. All school reading assessments should follow a standardised repeat protocol and referral pathway. A positive or negative screening result from a single screening encounter should not be communicated to the school (Gouroumourty et al., 2025, Glenning et al., 2026).

3. Prioritize physical activity, diet and sleep as the first-line prevention package. These domains were common and modifiable and were the most responsive in the short-term. Programmes should provide genuine opportunities to move and make healthier food choices, not just lectures in the classroom.

4. Connect universal prevention to risk-stratified early intervention. A healthier school environment is for all children, but children with concentrated behaviours, obesity, family history, and persistent elevated blood pressure or irregular lab results require a greater level of family counselling and clinical follow-up.

5. Make family involvement regular. Parents/caregivers affect food choice, sleep patterns, attendance at health care and physical activity. It's easier to get the family to communicate briefly and often, than to expect the children to do so without prompting.

6. Assess programme outcomes beyond weight loss. Cardiovascular-health score, physical activity, sleep, dietary behaviour, fitness, blood pressure, referral completion and maintenance after 6–12 months should be evaluated. Body mass index should remain important but should not be the only outcome.

7. Integrate into programme design. Recommendations should be affordable for low-income families and schools. The importance of walking, active play, water substitution, local food and sleep can be highlighted without the use of paid sports, supplements or wearable devices. Environmental and staffing supports may be needed in schools serving under-resourced communities.

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