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Burning Cars, Thick Smoke, and City Protests: When Healthy Food Becomes a Luxury, Public Health Pays the Price

By bestfolkmedicine · 19/10/2026 · 12 min read



As protests shake parts of Europe, burning barricades and clouds of smoke dominate the headlines. But behind the visible chaos lies another troubling question: What happens to people's health when everyday essentials, including nutritious food, become increasingly difficult to afford?

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The images are difficult to ignore.

Crowds filling European streets. Burning barricades. Thick smoke rising between buildings. Police confronting demonstrators as frustration over rising living costs turns into public unrest.

In France and Italy, protests during October 2026 have brought economic insecurity, public services, and household finances back into the spotlight.

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While many demonstrations remained peaceful, some escalated into violent confrontations, property destruction, and fires.

But beyond the dramatic images, there is another story that deserves attention.

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What happens when the financial pressure driving public anger also begins affecting what families eat, how they sleep, and how they protect their health?

For millions of households, the rising cost of everyday life is more than an economic inconvenience.

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It can become a public health concern.

And scientists have been warning for years that the inability to afford nutritious food can have consequences extending far beyond hunger.

Europe Is Protesting. But the Bigger Health Question Is Being Overlooked

In October 2026, widespread demonstrations in France reflected frustration over rising living costs, educational conditions, and public services.

On October 17, demonstrations in several French cities escalated into confrontations, vandalism, and fires.

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In Milan, Italy, protests connected to the cost of living and international conflicts also turned violent, with burning barricades, damaged businesses, and clashes with police.

The scenes captured international attention.

However, it is important to recognize that the people participating in peaceful demonstrations are not necessarily responsible for the violence that occurs during some protests.

The underlying economic concerns are also much broader than the disturbances themselves.

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Many households are struggling with rising expenses related to housing, energy, transportation, and food.

And when the basic cost of living increases faster than household resources, families face difficult decisions.

Should they spend more on groceries or save money for electricity?

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(135); });
Should they purchase fresh ingredients or choose cheaper, more filling alternatives?

Should they skip preventive healthcare to cover immediate expenses?

These choices can quietly influence health long before a medical problem becomes obvious.

When Healthy Food Becomes a Luxury

Imagine walking into a supermarket with the same budget you had a few years ago.

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You reach for fresh berries, vegetables, fish, olive oil, and other familiar groceries.

Then you notice the total.

Suddenly, your usual shopping basket is no longer affordable.

You begin making substitutions.

Perhaps you purchase fewer fresh vegetables.

Maybe you replace some protein-rich foods with cheaper staples.

Or you begin relying more heavily on inexpensive ready-made meals because they offer convenience and predictable costs.

There is nothing inherently unhealthy about choosing inexpensive foods.

Beans, lentils, oats, eggs, frozen vegetables, and many canned foods can provide excellent nutrition at relatively low prices.

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The problem emerges when financial pressure limits dietary variety, food quality, and access to enough nutritious food.

The World Health Organization has repeatedly emphasized that affordability strongly influences dietary choices.

Its 2026 healthy-eating guidance recognizes that income, food prices, and local availability shape whether families can maintain balanced diets.

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Healthy eating should not be a privilege reserved for people who can afford expensive groceries.

Yet economic circumstances increasingly influence which options are realistically available.

A Global Warning: Billions Still Struggle With Food Insecurity

The scale of the problem extends far beyond Europe.

According to the United Nations' State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2026 report, approximately 2.1 billion people experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2025.

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The report also identified the high cost of nutritious diets as a major continuing challenge.

Although global food security improved modestly, progress remained uneven.

These worldwide figures should not be confused with the number of people facing food insecurity in Europe specifically.

Nevertheless, they demonstrate how economic conditions can influence access to adequate nutrition on a massive scale.

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Food insecurity does not always mean having nothing to eat.

It can also mean worrying about food running out, compromising on dietary quality, reducing portions, or being unable to maintain consistent access to nutritious meals.

And these experiences can have both physical and psychological consequences.

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The Hidden Health Cost of Eating Cheaper

When financial pressure changes a family's diet, the consequences depend on what foods become less available and what replaces them.

A diet consistently lacking in essential nutrients may contribute to deficiencies and poor health outcomes.

Insufficient protein intake can make it harder to maintain muscle mass, particularly in older adults.

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Inadequate iron intake can contribute to iron-deficiency anemia.

Limited access to fruits, vegetables, legumes, and other fiber-rich foods can reduce dietary quality.

Meanwhile, frequent consumption of foods high in sodium, added sugars, and unhealthy fats may increase the risk of chronic disease.

The World Health Organization identifies unhealthy dietary patterns as major contributors to cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and other noncommunicable diseases.

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However, an important distinction must be made.

Cheap food is not automatically unhealthy, and expensive food is not automatically nutritious.

A serving of lentils may be far more nutritious than an expensive processed snack.

The real concern is whether families have the resources, time, facilities, and knowledge needed to maintain a varied, balanced diet.

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Food affordability is only one part of that equation.

Financial Stress Can Affect the Body, Too

Rising living costs do not influence health only through food.

They can also create prolonged psychological stress.

When someone constantly worries about bills, debt, rent, or providing for their family, the body's stress-response systems may become repeatedly activated.

During stressful situations, hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline help prepare the body to respond.

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These responses are normal and useful in the short term.

But persistent financial uncertainty may contribute to chronic stress.

Over time, ongoing stress can be associated with:

- Sleep disturbances and persistent fatigue.
- Anxiety and depressive symptoms.
- Headaches and muscle tension.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Unhealthy coping behaviors.
- Changes in appetite and eating patterns.
- Increased cardiovascular strain.

The relationship between stress and disease is complex.

Not everyone experiencing financial hardship develops a medical condition.

But prolonged economic insecurity can make healthy routines more difficult to maintain.

Consider a parent working long hours, worrying about bills, and returning home too exhausted to prepare a balanced meal.

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The challenge is not simply knowing what a healthy lifestyle looks like.

It is having the time, energy, and resources to practice it consistently.

Burning Cars and Thick Smoke: What Happens When Protests Turn Violent?

Economic pressure may have less visible health consequences, but fires during violent disturbances can create immediate environmental hazards.

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Burning cars, tires, plastics, furniture, and other manufactured materials can produce a complex mixture of airborne pollutants.

Depending on what is burning, the smoke may contain fine particulate matter, carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, and other hazardous substances.

Vehicle fires are especially concerning because modern cars contain numerous synthetic materials, including plastics, rubber, wiring insulation, and upholstery.

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When these materials burn, the resulting smoke is not harmless.

One of the major concerns is fine particulate matter, commonly called PM2.5.

These particles measure 2.5 micrometers in diameter or smaller.

Their size allows them to penetrate deep into the respiratory system.

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Scientific evidence has linked exposure to particulate air pollution with respiratory and cardiovascular health problems.

However, the actual risk from a particular protest-related fire depends on the materials burning, pollution concentration, duration of exposure, weather conditions, and proximity.

Without local air-quality measurements, it would be misleading to claim that a particular protest has caused widespread toxic exposure or lasting health damage.

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Who Is Most Vulnerable to Smoke Exposure?

Some individuals are more susceptible to air pollution than others.

These include people living with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular conditions, and certain other chronic illnesses.

Children, older adults, and pregnant women may also face increased risks from significant smoke exposure.

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Short-term exposure can cause symptoms such as eye irritation, coughing, throat discomfort, wheezing, and headaches.

For someone with asthma, polluted air may contribute to an exacerbation.

For individuals with cardiovascular disease, substantial exposure to particulate pollution may increase health risks.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(152); });
Anyone near an active fire should move away from the smoke and follow emergency-service instructions.

When outdoor smoke is affecting a neighborhood, keeping windows closed, limiting strenuous outdoor activity, and using appropriate indoor air filtration may help reduce exposure.

A properly fitted particulate respirator, such as an FFP2 or N95, can reduce inhalation of particles when outdoor exposure cannot be avoided, although it does not protect against all toxic gases.

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Breathing difficulty, chest pain, confusion, or other severe symptoms require urgent medical attention.

Are We Facing Two Different Public Health Problems at Once?

In some communities, the visible and invisible consequences of economic unrest may overlap.

One problem is immediate: fires, smoke, injuries, and disruption to daily life.

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The other develops more gradually: financial stress, reduced access to nutritious food, and difficulties maintaining healthy routines.

These problems do not affect everyone equally.

A financially secure household may absorb higher grocery prices without making major dietary changes.

A household already struggling to afford essentials may have far fewer options.

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Similarly, someone living close to a burning vehicle may experience immediate smoke exposure, while residents elsewhere in the city may remain unaffected.

This is why public health experts distinguish between individual exposure, population-level risk, and broader social conditions.

The images of protests may disappear from the news within days.

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The economic pressures behind them may persist much longer.

Why Families With Children and Older Adults Deserve Special Attention

Nutrition matters throughout life, but certain groups may be especially vulnerable when food access becomes unreliable.

Children need adequate energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals to support normal growth and development.

Persistent nutritional inadequacy can interfere with physical health and development.

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Older adults face different challenges.

Some have lower appetites, limited mobility, or medical conditions that complicate food preparation and dietary choices.

When their food budgets become restricted, maintaining sufficient protein and overall nutrient intake may become harder.

People managing chronic conditions such as diabetes or hypertension may also find it more difficult to follow recommended dietary patterns when appropriate foods are unaffordable or inaccessible.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(158); });
These challenges cannot always be solved through individual motivation.

They often require support from healthcare professionals, families, communities, and public policies that improve food access.

Can You Still Eat Healthy on a Tight Budget?

Despite the challenges, nutritious eating does not always require expensive ingredients or specialty products.

Several practical choices can help households make limited food budgets go further.

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Choose affordable nutritional staples

Beans, lentils, chickpeas, oats, potatoes, eggs, and seasonal vegetables can form the foundation of inexpensive, balanced meals.

Consider frozen and canned produce

Frozen vegetables and fruit can provide valuable nutrients, are convenient, and may reduce food waste.

Canned vegetables and legumes are also useful, particularly when lower-sodium options are available.

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Plan meals around affordable protein sources

Eggs, legumes, canned fish, and other economical protein options can help support nutritional needs.

Reduce unnecessary food waste

Planning meals, properly storing ingredients, and making use of leftovers can help stretch grocery budgets.

Compare nutritional value rather than marketing claims

Products labeled natural, premium, detoxifying, or superfood are not necessarily more nutritious than inexpensive whole foods.

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A healthy dietary pattern matters more than buying fashionable ingredients.

These strategies can help, but they cannot eliminate the broader economic problem when household income is insufficient to meet basic needs.

What Governments Can Do to Make Healthy Food More Accessible

Food affordability is not solely an individual responsibility.

The World Health Organization has emphasized the importance of policies that improve access to nutritious foods.

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Potential approaches include financial support for vulnerable households, healthier school meals, appropriate food subsidies, and policies that improve the availability of nutritious products.

Support for agricultural production, transportation infrastructure, and food distribution may also influence the cost and accessibility of groceries.

The effectiveness of these measures depends on how they are designed and implemented.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(163); });
There is no single policy capable of solving every affordability problem.

Nevertheless, making nutritious food more accessible is an important public health objective.

The Bigger Question: What Does a Healthy Society Really Cost?

The scenes unfolding in European cities raise questions extending beyond politics and economics.

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What happens when people feel that basic necessities are becoming harder to afford?

What happens when financial pressure begins affecting sleep, mental well-being, and food choices?

And how should societies respond when economic frustration is accompanied by public disorder, environmental hazards, and damaged infrastructure?

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(165); });
The answers require more than assigning blame.

Peaceful protest, violent destruction, household financial hardship, and population health are distinct issues, even when they appear in the same news cycle.

Understanding their connections does not mean assuming that all protesters support violence or that every economic hardship leads to illness.

It means recognizing that health is shaped by far more than medical appointments and personal lifestyle choices.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(166); });
Income, housing, food access, environmental conditions, and social stability all influence people's opportunities to live healthy lives.

Final Thoughts: The Smoke May Clear, but the Health Questions Remain

Burning barricades and clouds of smoke create dramatic images.

They demand immediate attention because fires and violent confrontations can place people at risk.

But there is another issue that rarely produces such visible images.

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(167); });
A parent quietly putting fresh groceries back on the supermarket shelf.

An older adult choosing between household bills and a balanced diet.

A family lying awake at night, worrying about whether next month's income will cover essential expenses.

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These experiences may not make international headlines.

Yet the broader evidence on food insecurity, chronic stress, and access to nutritious diets shows why economic conditions matter for public health.

A healthy society is not measured only by the absence of violence in its streets. It is also shaped by whether people can afford the basic conditions needed to remain healthy.

As Europe confronts renewed debates about living costs and public services, the question deserves serious attention:

ezstandalone.cmd.push(function () { ezstandalone.showAds(169); });
What happens to public health when healthy living becomes increasingly difficult to afford?

What do you think? Are rising food prices changing the way families eat where you live? Share your experience.

Medical Disclaimer: This article is intended for educational and informational purposes only and does not replace professional medical advice. Anyone experiencing significant smoke exposure, breathing difficulties, chest pain, or other concerning symptoms should seek appropriate medical care.

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