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First study to link pollination loss with unhealthy diet

Lower-income countries lost significant agricultural income due to insufficient pollination

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Inadequate pollination has led to a 3-5% loss of fruit, vegetable, and nut production and an estimated 427,000 excess deaths annually from lost healthy food consumption and associated diseases, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and certain cancers, according to research led by Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. It is the first study to quantify the human health toll of insufficient wild (animal) pollinators on human health.

"A critical missing piece in the biodiversity discussion has been a lack of direct linkages to human health. This research establishes that loss of pollinators is already impacting health on a scale with other global health risk factors, such as prostate cancer or substance use disorders," said Samuel Myers, principal research scientist, planetary health, Department of Environmental Health.

Key among insect species are pollinators, which increase yields of three-fourths of crop varieties and are critical to growing healthy foods like fruits, vegetables, and nuts. Changes in land-use, use of harmful pesticides, and advancing climate change threaten wild pollinators, imperilling human supply of healthy foods.

According to the study, strategies to protect wild pollinators are not just an environmental issue, but a health and economic one as well.

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