

Forecasting the flu is a challenge. Here's why

[F]or the third week in a row, flu activity remains widespread in 49 states, according to the latest CDC data. Some 6.6 percent of patients visiting the doctor now have flu-like symptoms, the highest rate since 2009.

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One, this is turning into a really aggressive flu season. Two, CDC data is far from a perfect predictor of how bad a flu season will be, let alone how bad it already is. The CDC bases its "[Flu View](#)" reports and predictions on physician records that report "influenza-like illnesses" among patients. That means there's about a six-day gap between the ground truth and the CDC's best understanding of it.

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Since 2013, the influenza division at the CDC has been working to improve its forecasting methodologies.

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On a beta website, the agency posts flu forecasts based on their work. This year, for the first time ever, the CDC is sponsoring a "State FluSight challenge," asking states to submit public records of influenza-like illness. In the past, the CDC has only ever charted national and regional flu trends.

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The CDC might also be capable of making better recommendations for controlling pandemics, or mass outbreaks in localized areas. "If you close a school after the peak, you haven't really done much to stop the spread of flu," [epidemiologist Matt] Biggerstaff says. "But if you close on the uptick, you can have a much bigger impact."

Read full, original post: [Why It's So Hard to Forecast the Flu](#)