

# Science on the Hill: The forecast calls for flu

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Beyond the familiar flu, infectious—and preventable—diseases such as HIV and measles kill millions around the world. Forecasting their impact would enable the public health community to take steps to spare the public the grief and economic impact of an epidemic. Yet the science of predicting infectious diseases lags far behind a similarly complex field, weather forecasting. It too is marked by huge unknowns but has steadily improved over the last half century. We expect an accurate weather report to tell us whether we should wear a heavy coat or put on sunscreen. With so much at stake around infectious diseases, we need a similarly robust system for forecasting them.

We're getting close. Using mathematics, computer programs, statistics and information about how disease develops and spreads, a research team at Los Alamos National Laboratory found a way to forecast the flu season and even next week's sickness trends. The answer came not from pipettes and petri dishes, but Big Data in the form of everyone's favorite online reference, Wikipedia.

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