

## Predictive Cold & Flu Tracker



When social media is abuzz with tweets about cold and flu, it's more likely that actual viruses are spreading. Based on a study of online flu conversations that found a strong correlation between these conversations and actual flu cases last year, researchers launched a cold and flu conversation tracker that is a social predictor of the flu.

The "Cold & Flu Pulse" analyses millions of conversations in real time and reports how cold and flu is trending online, including what topics are being discussed, top cities where it's trending, and tips related to the current virality of the cold and flu. The tracker uses the Bottlenose Stream Intelligence™ system to find the words, hashtags and topics about cold and flu that define a trend and measure conversation volume.

See also: [Social Media May Hold Clues to Health Information](#)

In the study of flu conversations, Clorox worked with Jonah Berger, social media expert and bestselling author of "Contagious: Why Things Catch On." By identifying trends in flu conversation online, Clorox will help consumers identify predictors of increased flu activity and take steps to #stopthespread of the flu offline.

"We aimed to uncover what people talk and share about online when it comes to the flu and see if there is a link to flu virality offline," explains Berger. "Our findings reveal a strong correlation between the two. Online flu conversation tends to spike a week earlier than number of flu cases confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."

Berger and Ketchum Global Research & Analytics reviewed weekly data on flu prevalence from the CDC's U.S. Outpatient Influenza-like Illness Surveillance Network. They analysed weekly mentions of various flu and other related terms in social media using the tool Brandwatch. In addition, they performed textual analysis and manual coding on the top 100 flu tweets from the past year, as well as a random sample of 1,000 flu tweets.

Using a lagged data structure, the researchers examine not only the co-incidence of flu-related discussions and flu severity, but also whether one preceded the other. A series of correlations and regression models were developed to examine the relationship between the confirmed incidence of flu and social media. The team also developed a time-series model to test the hypothesis that mentions of the flu on social media in one week can be used to predict the actual number of confirmed flu cases in the next week.

The study also showed that online conversations about flu prevention also peaked before the flu was most severe, underlining the importance of prevention throughout cold and flu season, which can begin as early as October and last until as late as March.

"Vaccination is the first step in flu prevention," says Dr. Tanya Altmann, a paediatrician. Even after having a vaccination, the doctor recommends taking simple steps to help stop the spread of germs, such as washing your hands frequently, coughing and sneezing into elbows, and disinfecting germ hot spots with a disinfectant approved to kill cold and flu viruses.

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