

Google mines online searches to map flu in Mexico

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A sign is viewed outside of the Google headquarters in 2008 in Mountain View, California. Google.org on began using flu-related Internet search traffic in Mexico to create an online map that might provide clues to how influenza is spreading in that country.

Google.org on Wednesday began using flu-related Internet search traffic in Mexico to create an online map that might provide clues to how influenza is spreading in that country.

The Internet giant's philanthropic arm has been doing the same for the United States at its [Google Flu Trends](#) website since late 2008 but global spread of an [influenza](#) strain traced to Mexico prompted a longer reach.

"We launched Google Flu Trends after finding a close relationship between how many people search for flu-related topics and how many

people actually have flu symptoms," Google software engineers Jeremy Ginsberg and Matt Mohebbi said in a blog post at the California firm's website.

"Google Flu Trends may be able to detect influenza outbreaks earlier than other systems because it estimates flu activity in near real time."

Inquiries from public health officials led Google to try using levels of searches on flu-related topics to make reliable, real-time estimates of actual cases of influenza in Mexican states, Ginsberg and Mohebbi wrote.

"Experimental Flu Trends for Mexico is, as you might have guessed, very experimental," the software engineers cautioned.

"But the system has detected increases in flu-related searches in [Mexico City](#) and a few other Mexican states in recent days, beginning early in the week of April 19-25."

While Google has been able to check Flu Trends estimates against statistics gathered by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a similar verification option does not exist in Mexico, according to Ginsberg and Mohebbi.

Google's new Mexico Flu Trends map indicated "moderate" levels of flu activity in about a half dozen spots including Oaxaca, Veracruz, Tamaulipas and Jalisco.

Google Flu Trends estimates of flu activity in the United States continued on Wednesday to be rated "low" but the engineers said they are vigilantly "keeping an eye on the data to look for any spike in activity."

President Barack Obama warned Wednesday that "utmost precautions" were needed to contain the spreading outbreak as the first fatality was reported in the United States, a Mexican toddler who died in a Houston hospital on Monday.

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