



Written by [Denise Behreandt](#) on November 13, 2008

## Google's Flu Tracking System

Data from these searches has been accumulated since 2003 and compared to data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). "We compared these aggregated queries against data provided by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and we found that there's a very close relationship between the frequency of these search queries and the number of people who are experiencing flu-like symptoms each week," says Google.

The service is an improvement according to Google because CDC methods require a 1-2 week waiting period to receive results, while Google's search queries can be calculated quickly.

Although Google acknowledges that their tracking system is "still very experimental," they hope that by providing the CDC with daily results from "Google Flu Trends," the spread of the disease may be minimized or prevented. Google reminds visitors at its ["Flu Trends" site](#) that 500,000 die each year from the flu worldwide. Google goes on to point out that with early detection, an outbreak can be minimized and pandemics, like the 1918 "Spanish Flu," can be prevented. "Our up-to-date influenza estimates may enable public health officials and health professionals to better respond to seasonal epidemics and — though we hope never to find out — pandemics," Google says of its new tracking service.

The new service, though, may raise privacy concerns. Users of Google search might be alarmed that billions of searches have been collected since 2003, and shared with the CDC. Google, however, assures that "Flu Trends can never be used to identify individual users because we rely on anonymized, aggregated counts of how often certain search queries occur each week."

But what if a decision is made that the results of these consolidated private searches are necessary in the interest of the public? Will the government insist on information that would provide the location(s) where individuals search for "AIDS," "Addict," "Revolution," and "Criminal"?

Expansion of the new service into more invasive areas is a possibility. "I think we are just scratching the





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surface of what's possible with collective intelligence," Thomas Malone, a professor at M.I.T. says. Meanwhile, Google CEO Eric Schmidt promises: "From a technological perspective, it is the beginning."

*Photo: AP Images*



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