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Flu? Malaria? Disease forecasters look to the sky

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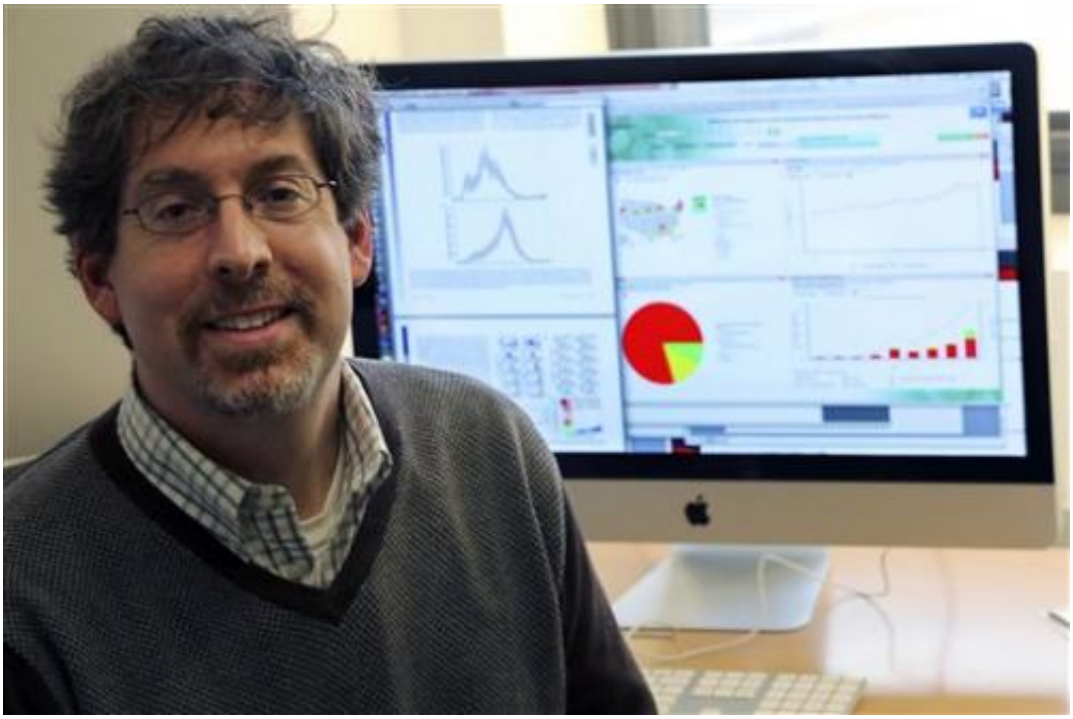

In this Thursday, Dec. 13, 2012 photo, Jeffrey Shaman poses for a portrait in his office at Columbia University's Department of Environmental Health Sciences in New York. In the study of New York City flu cases published last month in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the authors said they could forecast, by up to seven weeks, the peak of flu season. Scientists hope to try real-time predictions as early as next year, said Jeffrey Shaman of Columbia University, who led the work. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

Sunny with a chance of flu? That's what some health scientists are

thinking, as they study the weather for clues about how to predict disease outbreaks.

A growing wave of computer models factor in rainfall, temperature or other weather conditions to forecast disease, In one recent study, scientists said they could predict more than seven weeks in advance when flu season was going to peak in New York City.

In this Friday, May 11, 2007 photo, a mosquito is sorted according to species and gender before testing for West Nile Virus at the Dallas County mosquito lab in Dallas. Scientists have been working on mathematical models to predict outbreaks for decades and have long factored in the weather. They have known, for example, that temperature and rainfall affect the breeding of mosquitoes that carry malaria, West Nile virus and other dangerous diseases. (AP Photo/LM Otero, File)

Health officials are excited by this kind of work and the idea that it could be used to fine-tune vaccination campaigns. But some experts note that outbreaks are influenced as much, or more, by human behavior and other factors as by the weather.

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