Title: Predictive evolutionary modelling for influenza virus by site-based dynamics of mutations

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Abstract: A predictive evolutionary model was developed to forecast representative influenza viral strains for upcoming epidemic seasons. Influenza virus continuously evolves to escape human adaptive immunity and generates seasonal epidemics. A computational approach beth-1 that models site-wise mutation dynamics demonstrated remarkable matching of predicted strains to the circulating viruses in subsequent seasons for the influenza A(H1N1)pdm09 and A(H3N2) viruses in both retrospective and prospective validations. The method offers a promising and ready-to-use tool to facilitate vaccine strain selection for the influenza virus, achieved by capturing heterogeneous evolutionary dynamics over genome space-time and linking molecular variants to population immune response.

One-Sentence Summary: A computational model predicts virus evolution and facilitates vaccine strain selection for the influenza virus

Main Text:

The major driver of recurrent influenza epidemics is fast virus evolution that enables the influenza virus to escape from human immunity acquired from prior vaccination or infection[1]. In response, influenza vaccines need to be updated annually to match the circulating virus population[2]. Prediction of virus evolution has a critical role in ensuring the protective effect of influenza vaccines, which aids the selection of candidate vaccine strains nearly a year ahead before the arrival of next epidemic season[2,3]. We present a computational approach to predict influenza virus evolution through modelling the dynamic process of mutation adaptation at individual sites and locating the optimal wild-type strains for vaccine candidates by a combined evaluation of multiple gene segments and population immune profiles.

Virus evolution is shaped by a complex interplay of genetic mutations, host immune response, and epidemiology[1,4]. Thus, although mutation is stochastic[5,6], the evolutionary process could be traced with the observed viral genetic and antigenic profiling in the host population[6]. The influenza virus evolves through antigenic drifts on the two surface proteins, hemagglutinin (HA) and neuraminidase (NA), the primary immuno-active components of influenza vaccines. Previous studies showed that mutations at epitope sites of the HA played a dominant role in characterizing virus antigenic change and were under higher immune selection pressure[5,7]. In addition to the major antigenic substitutions, the virus evolution is also critically influenced by epistatic mutations or mutation interference effects[8-10], making predictions challenging as the evolutionary dynamics is non-uniform across genomic regions and time.

Currently, influenza vaccine strain determination involves extensive surveillance and characterization of the virus in terms of genetic, antigenic evolution, and epidemiological profiles, a global effort coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO)[11]. While antigenic evolution of influenza virus can be mapped by the antigenic cartography based on hemagglutinin inhibition (HAI) assay data[12], genetic evolution is mostly delineated with the phylogenetic trees[13]. Current prediction methods of virus evolution mainly focus on modelling the fitness of tree parts[14-16], using sequences of the HA or HA1 segment, with epitope or antigenic data incorporated as component information[14,15,17]. These methods projected the most likely predominant future lineages by tracing the fitness of clusters of strains. However, as the virus evolution is driven by major antigenic substitutions, a substantial amount of information is contained in the dynamic process of the fitness of mutations, characterizing which might provide critical information for predicting genetic evolution.

A site-based dynamic model for mutation forecasting. Our prediction method is primarily based on modelling the time-resolved frequency pattern of mutations for individual sites across virus genome segments (**Fig. 1**). The selective advantage of a mutation could be reflected in their growing prevalence in the host population. To make a projection into the future, the velocity of mutation frequency growth can be estimated by solving the first-order derivative of a frequency function over a period of mutation adaption in the host population, which is captured by the mutation transition time (**Methods**). Since the transition time is specific to substituted residues, the dynamic model is site-based and time-dependent. Scanning over the genome restores a global picture of mutation-selection. Such design shares the advantage of the agent-based model that agglomerates individual agents carrying simple rules and avoids fitting a complicated system with copious parameters or unrealistic assumptions[18]. The potential relationship between the genome-wide dynamics of mutation prevalence and population epidemics is illustrated in **Extended Data Fig. 1**. The site-based model is also highly computationally efficient in analyzing large genomic datasets.

Specifically, transition time in this study is defined as the duration for a mutation to emerge until it reaches an influential frequency in the population. This quantity is related to but different from the conventional fixation time, which covers a period from the first observation time of a mutation to the point when it reaches 0.99 prevalence in the population. The fixation time was reported to span over a long period of 4-32 years for the influenza virus A(H3N2)[8]. In contrast, the transition time we identified for the same viral subtype had a median length of only ~17 months and ranged between 0-7 years (**Extended Data Fig. 2**). As the transition time calibrates the initial period of mutation adaptation, it may have the advantage of informing the emerging genetic variants on a short-term time horizon. The transition time is determined with a frequency threshold (θ) indicating fitness strength, at which the overall mutation activities are detected to influence population epidemics significantly (**Extended Data Fig. 1**); and it can be estimated using the virus epidemic-genetic association model we previously developed[19] (**Methods**).

This site-based mutation dynamic model enables the prediction for fitness of competing residues at individual sites, thereby the construction of a genome-wide fitness landscape of the virus population in future time (**Fig. 1**). Thus, a pseudo consensus strain can be shaped containing all mutations showing selective advantage relative to their precedent or competing

alleles in the upcoming epidemic season. It serves as a prototype to search for the optimal wild-type virus for consideration as vaccine strain.

Identification of optimal wild-type virus The second part of our method is identification of optimal wild-type virus based on the predicted virus population from a pool of available strains (**Fig. 1**). The aim is to minimize the genetic distance of HA and NA proteins to the forecasted representative strain of future virus population simultaneously. This could be achieved by referencing the estimated relationship between vaccine effectiveness (VE) and genetic distance (GD)[20-22], with a goal of maximizing the projected VE in the future virus population (**Methods**). In particular, the VE-GD model is powered by a subset of epitopes, the predictor codon sites, and their relative contribution to explaining VE (**Extended Data Table 1**). Therefore, the step of vaccine strain selection is essentially informed by the antigenic relevance of mutations estimated over the seasons. Although only HA concentration is standardized in the current vaccine production[23], both genes are major components of the influenza vaccines; the integrative evaluation would provide a useful tool for identifying wild-type virus for potential vaccine strains.

This two-step evolution prediction and wild-type virus selection method are referred to as the "beth-1" for easy reference.

Genetic matching of retroactively predicted vaccine strains. We applied the beth-1 to predict vaccine strains of the influenza A (H1N1)pdm09 (pH1N1) and A (H3N2) viruses. Data was collected from the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID)[24] between 1999/2000 and 2021/22, involving a total number of 11,243 HA and 9,396 NA sequences of pH1N1, and 31,501 HA and 28,967 NA sequences of H3N2 from ten geographical regions in the Northern Hemisphere, covering North America (New York State, California State, Canada), Europe (United Kingdom, Germany, France), and Asia (Hong Kong SAR, South China provinces, Japan, Singapore) (**Extended Data Table 2**). The prediction was performed using data up to February in season *T*, targeting the subsequent epidemic season *T*+1 (October-April next year). We calculate the average amino acid (AA) mismatch between the predicted strain and sequences of circulating viruses in the target season to determine prediction accuracy. To fully understand the performance of beth-1 in the context of existing vaccines, we calculated the following comparison groups: (1) a naïve approach using a randomly selected circulating strain in season *T*, repeated ten times; (2) WHO-recommended vaccine strains (the "current-system") for season *T*+1; (3) beth-1 predicted strains for season

T+1; (4) the "answer": the observed representative strains in season *T*+1 (**Methods**) (**Extended Data Table 3**).

In the retroactive season-to-season prediction, beth-1 demonstrated substantially improved prediction accuracy compared to the current-system on full-length HA and NA gene, their epitopes, and for both pH1N1 and H3N2 subtypes (**Fig. 2, Extended Data Table 4**). Three-year data was burnt-in for model building. For pH1N1, prediction was conducted for seasons from 2012/13 to 2018/19. Averaging over the seven seasonal prediction outcomes, beth-1 reduced the genetic mismatch of the current-system by 7.7 AAs (SD 6.3, paired *t*-test *p*-value < 0.001) on full-length HA protein and reduced the HA epitope mismatch by 2.3 AAs (SD 1.2, paired *t*-test *p*-value < 0.001) (**Fig. 2**). This accuracy was close to the best possible outcome of a 0.7 AA mismatch given by the answer strain (**Fig. 2, Extended Data Table 4**). Similarly, the NA proteins achieved significant improvements in vaccine matching by beth-1 on both the full-length NA sequence and its epitope regions. We also observed that the current-system performed worse than the naïve approach, likely due to the lack of updates on vaccine strains in multiple of the influenza seasons and a number of practical constraints of WHO vaccine strain selection, such as the availability of egg-isolated virus and sufficiency of viral growth in production platform[25]. Overall, in the retrospective validation data, beth-1 prediction is expected to improve the current VE against influenza pH1N1 by an absolute 11.5% (95% CI: 9.4-13.5), estimated by the VE-GD model.

For the H3N2 virus, between seasons 2002/03 to 2018/19, beth-1 prediction significantly reduced genetic mismatch of the current-system by 4.2 AAs (SD 5.3) on full-length HA and by 2.6 AAs (SD 3.6) on the epitope sites (**Fig. 2, Extended Data Table 4**). These improvements corresponded to a VE increase by absolute 8.5% (95% CI: 6.8-10.2) relative to the current vaccines against the H3N2. Among the seasons when the predicted strains differ between the two-protein model and the single-protein model, the two-protein model enhanced VE by absolute 12.88% (95% CI: 9.96 – 15.82, *t*-test *p*-value < 0.001) relative to the HA-only model on average in three seasons.

Seasonal and geographical breakdown of prediction accuracies were also analyzed. Year-by-year comparison with the current-system showed that the beth-1 gave vastly lower genetic mismatch throughout the epidemic seasons (**Fig. 3, Extended Data Table 5-8**). However, discrepancy between the two predictions narrowed in recent years as a result of both annual vaccine updates and improved predictions of the current-system. A separate analysis by

geographical regions showed no systematic difference in vaccine mismatch across continents by both prediction methods and for the two influenza A subtypes (**Extended Data Fig. 3, Extended Data Table 9-12**).

We performed two predictions for the 2019/20 epidemic season: a prospective prediction conducted in October 2019 using training data up to June 2019, from which the predicted strains were recorded on blockchain **(Extended Data Table 13)**; and a retroactive prediction conducted in March 2022 using data up to March 2019 to better match the current-system's timeline. Genetic mismatch was calculated by all prediction experiments **(Extended Data Table 14)**. Between the 2019-03 and 2019-06 predictions by beth-1, the latter one recorded 0.1 less HA epitope mismatches for pH1N1 and 1.1 less HA epitope mismatch for H3N2. Both predictions showed significant superior performance comparing to the current-system for pH1N1 on all protein segments and NA of H3N2, and showed non-inferior performance in other segments **(Extended Data Table 14)**. We further evaluated the immunogenicity of predicted strains for this particular season using clinical samples collected in Hong Kong (**Methods, Extended Data Fig. 4**). Against the viral isolates of H1 and H3 positive samples, beth-1 strains induced significantly higher neutralizing antibodies in $PRNT_{50}$ for pH1N1 and non-inferior antibodies for H3N2, compared to the current vaccines (**Extended Data Fig. 5**).

Prospective predictions and validations for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 seasons. To further validate our prediction method, we conducted prospective predictions and validations for two more seasons in 2020/21 and 2021/22. The predictions were blockchain recorded and sent to the WHO before vaccine composition meetings (**Extended Data Table 13**). In 2020/21, on the pH1N1 HA epitopes, beth-1 gave 2.7 AAs (SD 1.1) mismatch and the current-system gave 3.8 AAs (SD 1.2) mismatch, while on the H3N2 HA epitopes, both methods resulted in ~13 AAs mismatch (**Fig. 2** dashed lines, **Extended Data Table 14**). This season was under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 that recorded sharply reduced sequence samples of influenza[26,27]. Nevertheless, activities of influenza virus A resurged with relaxed pandemic control measures in 2021/22[28].

In the 2021/22 season (**Fig. 2** dotted lines, **Extended Data Table 14**), for the pH1N1, the HA epitope mismatch are ~3.5 AAs by both beth-1 and the current-system; however, for H3N2, the HA epitope mismatches were 4.2 AAs (SD 1.6) by beth-1 and 10.8 AAs (SD 1.9) by the current-system (p-value < 0.001). This genetic matching corresponds to expected VE

improvement resulted from beth-1 by absolute 31.7% (95% CI: 31.5-31.9) for the H3N2, compared to the current vaccines in the 2021/22 epidemic season.

To further understand the relationship between the beth-1 strains and the current vaccine viruses, we mapped them on phylogenetic trees for the three prospective seasons, 2019/20 – 2021/22 (**Fig. 4**). The phylogenies of pH1N1 delineated two major clades through the seasons, of which one is predominant with strains from Europe and the other is predominant with strains from Asia; while strains from North America are distributed in both clades. Interestingly, beth-1 and the current-system each captures one of the two clades in these seasons. For the H3N2, the epidemic seasons are dominated by a single major trunk. In 2019/20, beth-1 captured the correct trunk while the current-system did not; in 2020/21, the two methods identified almost the identical strain; and in the latest 2021/22 season, both methods successfully forecasted the correct clade, while beth-1 predicted strains extended slightly more into the future clusters.

How predictable are the pH1N1 and H3N2 viruses? Our predictions for the two influenza pH1N1 and H3N2 viruses allowed us to compare the predictability for the two subtypes by the genetic mismatch of the HA epitopes in the retrospective data. Ceiling of prediction can be approximated by the answer vaccine strain, that is, the observed representative strain in respective seasons. For the pH1N1 virus, the lowest possible mismatch of HA epitope was 0.7 AAs (SD 0.4) achieved by the answer strain, and the beth-1's mismatch was 1.2 AAs (SD 0.6) **(Fig. 2, Extended Data Table 4)**. This suggests that a highly precise hit by predictive modelling is achievable for the pH1N1. However, for the H3N2 virus, the lowest possible HA epitope mismatch was as large as 3.5 AAs (SD 1.1), that is 2.8 more epitope mismatches compared to the pH1N1. Although the 5.1 AAs (SD 1.7) mismatch by beth-1 was only 1.6 residue away from the answer, the prediction for H3N2 would be ultimately bounded by the ceiling of genetic matching. The large genetic mismatch of the H3N2 vaccine strain might be attributed to the high genetic diversity of this virus[29,30], making the selection of a single representative wild-type strain challenging. New vaccinology strategies, such as developing broadly reactive vaccines, designing antigens containing multiple H3N2 strains, or preparing region-specific vaccines, may provide solutions from other dimensions to enhance vaccine protection against this subtype.

Comparing prediction performances of beth-1 and the existing prediction models for influenza evolution. Existing predictive models for influenza evolution mostly adopt

strain-based analyses and extract information presented by the phylogenetic structure. Neher et al. used the local branching index (LBI) to rank tree-nodes in a given phylogeny to identify lineage with the highest fitness as a progenitor of strains in an upcoming influenza season, where fitness is estimated by integrating exponentially discounted branch-length surrounding a node[16]. Luksza and Lassig calculated frequency of tree-clades and predicted the future predominant clade by an exponential function (the Malthusian model) with a certain growth rate[14]. Steinbruck and McHardy used allele dynamics plots to identify the top three alleles characterizing antigenic novelty of tree-clades in a given season, pre-screened based on the epitope information, HI data, and phylogeny[31,32]. Also based on the Malthusian model, Huddleston et al regarded strain rather than clade as a primary unit of analysis, and investigated different combination of factors to calculate growth rate for strain, including epitope mutations, non-epitope mutations (mutational load), LBI, HI antigenic novelty, and deep mutational scanning[15]. The best performing model of Huddleston et al incorporated mutational load and strain-specific HI data, trained for the H3N2. Herein, we compared beth-1 to the current state-of-the-art methods, the LBI and Huddleston's best model on H3N2 in the retrospective data from 2002/03 to 2018/19 (**Methods**). The results showed that beth-1 outperformed the existing models significantly (**Fig 5**). For instance, over the ten geographical regions, the mean mismatch obtained by beth-1 on full-length HA of H3N2 is 7.5 AAs (SD 2.2), lower than the 9.4 AAs (SD 2.8) by the method of Huddleston et al (p-value < 0.001) and 9.5 AAs (SD 4.7) by the LBI (p-value = 0.008). For predicting NA of H3N2 and pH1N1, we compare beth-1 to the LBI, as strain-specific HI data is not fully available to train the model of Huddleston et al. Results shows that the beth-1 gives significantly improved genetic matching compared to the LBI on full-length and epitopes of HA of pH1N1 and NA of H3N2, and full-length NA of pH1N1 (**Extended Data Fig. 6**).

Advantages of site-based dynamic model for evolution prediction. Strain-based dynamic model often requires the estimation of a single-valued growth rate for a given genome to project future fitness, whereas a site-based dynamic model is not constraint by a constant growth rate over genome space-time. This property leads to the following three advantages in predicting virus evolution. First, key mutations distributed over multiple clades could be captured as they arise, while the virus is trialing various epistatic combinations before shaping a stable lineage. Second, a site-based model avoids making assumption for directional mutation effects on fitness, which is self-evident in mutation frequency. In contrast, strain-based models

often need to assume negative effect for the non-epitope mutations, to offset the genetic distance obtained from gene-based analysis in modelling evolutionary pathway[14-16], although studies suggested that the alternative might be true[33,34]. Third, the site-based dynamic model is adaptive to the altered residue fitness from epistasis and environmental factors[10,35], by sampling and re-estimating the dynamic function at each time period. When such adaptive framework is not in place, study showed that the fitness advantage estimated in the initial stage of mutation emergence cannot predict their ultimate fixation[36]. However, the proposed site-based dynamic model avoids making assumptions on the constant effect of mutations. Through adaptive estimation of fitness by genomic site and time, it projects a probable fitness landscape including all the trackable in-advantage mutations to the near future.

"Representativeness" of viral strains in the perspective of strain-based and site-based analysis. Under the perspective of the existing strain-based analysis, a representative virus is naturally indicated by the majority vote of strain or clades in a host population. While under the perspective of site-based analysis, a genome-wide fitness landscape can be constructed for a virus population, without missing a single mutation showing selective advantage. Based on this fitness landscape, a mode estimator can be operated at individual sites and generate a consensus sequence. Therefore, the consensus sequence is a natural representative strain for a virus population through site-wise analysis of viral fitness. Beth-1 in its primary objective establishes the theoretical framework to model mutation dynamics site-wise and projects the fitness landscape into the future.

Limitation of the study. One major limitation in our analysis is the sparse time interval, constrained by the sequence sample size in the earlier years, which prevented us from using more complex trajectory functions for prediction. In the future, this sampling gap may be gradually closed with increasing surveillance strength and global collaborations, and non-linear functions can be explored. Second, the epitope mismatch could have been underestimated as it was subjected to the known epitope sites, especially in the immune-subdominant protein segments. Nevertheless, the comparison across prediction methods was fair with the same evaluation criteria.

Current WHO vaccine virus selection considerations. Currently, WHO selects vaccine strains by considering the emergence of virus with distinct genetic and antigenic characteristics, their geographical spread, and the potential loss of effective binding of antibodies from antisera of previously vaccinated subjects against the current circulating

viruses[25]. These factors depict a picture of the current global virus population and their antigenic relationship to the previous representative viruses and vaccine strains, based on which recommendations of vaccine strains are made. One major consideration of vaccine strain selection is the HAI titre for antigenic characterization[37]. Nevertheless, the HAI only evaluates one specific type of reaction, that is the prevention of HA binding to sialic acid receptor on host cells inhibited by the anti-HA head antibodies[38], while other types of immune responses are undetected, such as the antibodies against HA-stem and T-cell responses that also play important roles in protection[39,40]. Developing improved assays with broader range or finer specificity for vaccine protection may facilitate the assessment and selection of vaccine strain[25]. Another major constraint of the current vaccine strain selection process is the limited availability of high-yield virus in embryonated eggs, with which more than 95% of the current influenza vaccines are produced[41]. These candidate vaccine viruses (CVVs) are prepared from representative strains by the WHO Collaborating Centres (CC) and Essential Regulatory Labs (ERLs) before the annual WHO consultation meetings[25]. Thus, earlier prediction, even year-round projection of future representative strains may facilitate the preparation of CVVs and the subsequent vaccine strain selection, while the development of alternative vaccine technologies for influenza virus would sidestep the constraints of egg-based platform. The potential of computational optimized vaccine strains may be fully explored coupling with the availability of new production platforms, as “new wine in new wineskins”.

In summary, we have introduced a new computational method, the beth-1, for predicting influenza evolution through the site-based fitness dynamic modelling, and enables simultaneously considering multiple proteins to locate optimal wild-type virus. The model demonstrated promising prediction performances in both retrospective and prospective real data applications. The framework has potentially wide applications by virology labs, vaccine manufacturers, health authorities and the WHO for indicating virus evolution and preparing vaccine virus, to facilitate influenza vaccine strain selection towards more effective vaccines.

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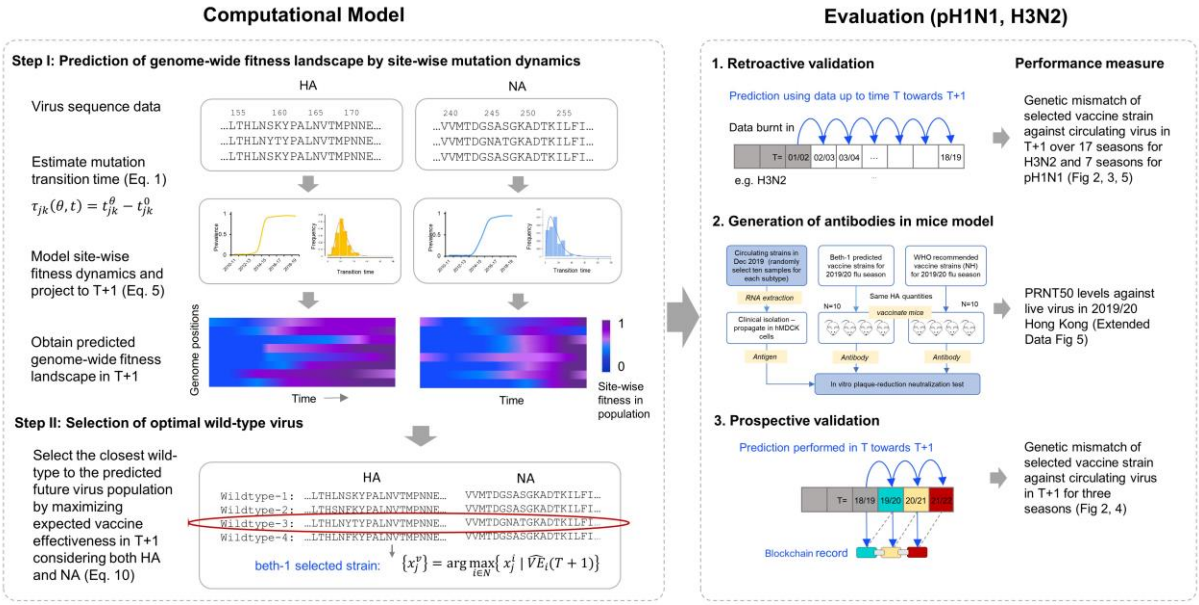

Fig. 1 | Overview of the computational model and study design. Site-wise fitness dynamics are modelled and projected to the next season (T+1). Based on the predicted genome-wide fitness landscape of future virus population, an optimal wild-type virus can be selected to maximize expected vaccine effectiveness integrating information of both hemagglutinin and neuraminidase genes. The prediction is validated by genetic mismatch against observed circulating viruses in the Northern Hemisphere retroactively and prospectively for pH1N1 and H3N2. In addition, mouse model is used to evaluate the antibodies elicited by predicted vaccine strain in neutralizing the clinical isolates in 2019/20 season.

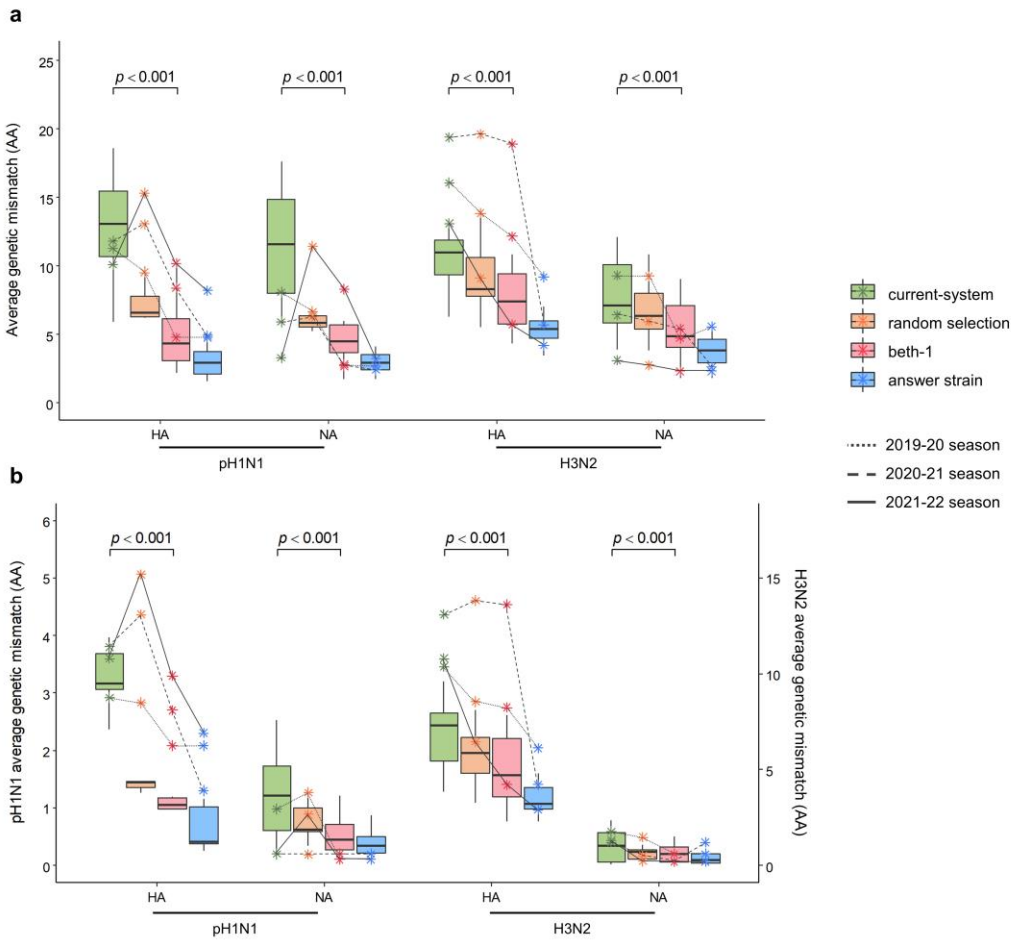

Fig. 2 | Overall prediction performance in retrospective and prospective data for influenza pH1N1 and H3N2. a, Full-length protein. **b**, Epitope. The boxplots display distribution of yearly genetic mismatch (amino acids, AA) of vaccine strains in retrospective data during seasons 2012/13-2018/19 for pH1N1 and 2002/03-2018/19 for H3N2. Panel **b** left Y-axis: average genetic mismatch of pH1N1; right Y-axis: average genetic mismatch of H3N2. Four prediction comparison groups include the current-system (green), random selection (yellow), beth-1 (pink), and the actual representative strain (blue). The asterisks represent mismatches in prospective prediction in the 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22 flu seasons. In both the retrospective and prospective validations, beth-1 shows prevailingly lower genetic mismatch on the protein segments of the two influenza subtypes, compared to the current-system.

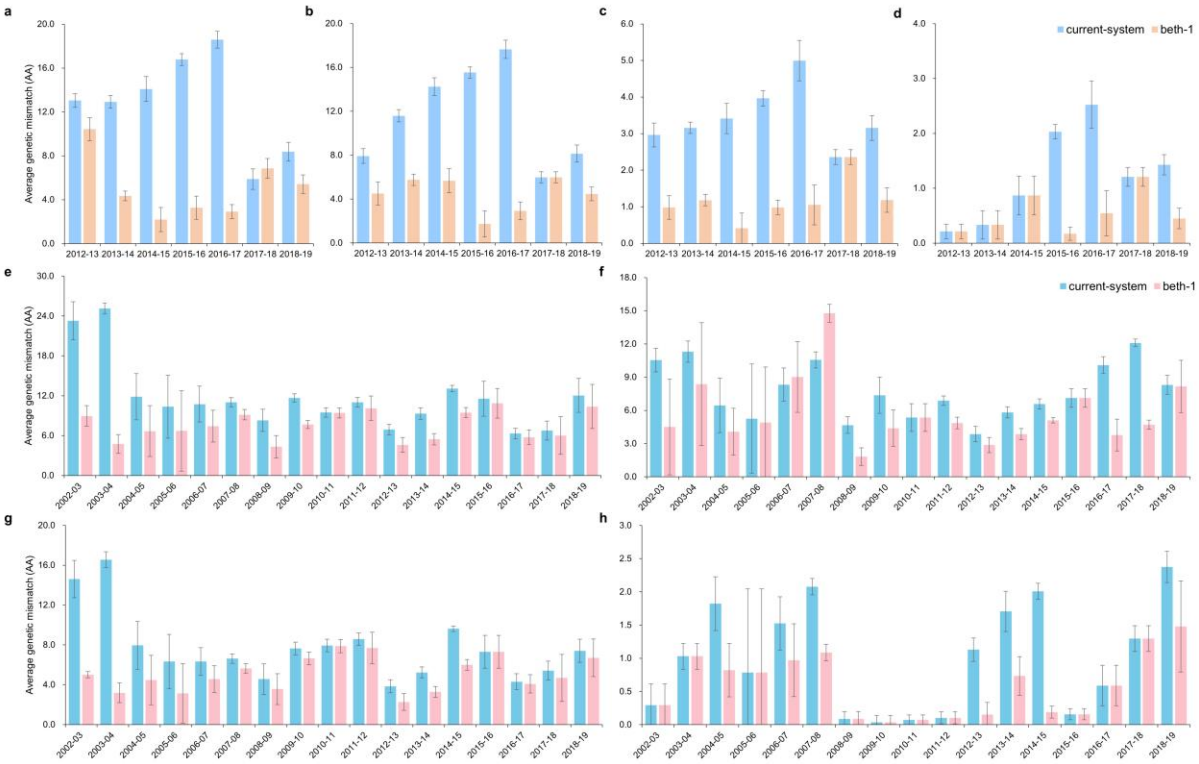

Fig. 3 | Genetic mismatch of predicted vaccine strains of pH1N1 and H3N2 against circulating viruses in retrospective data. a, pH1N1, HA full sequence (566 codons). **b**, pH1N1, NA full sequence (469 codons). **c**, pH1N1, HA epitopes (50 sites). **d**, pH1N1, NA epitopes (30 sites). **e**, H3N2, HA full sequence (566 codons). **f**, H3N2, NA full sequence (469 codons). **g**, H3N2, HA epitopes (131 sites). **h**, H3N2, NA epitopes (12 sites). Vaccine strains were predicted by the proposed method (beth-1) and were assessed by the average amino acids mismatch (Y-axis) against circulating viruses in ten geographical regions in respective epidemic seasons (X-axis). In the retrospective epidemic seasons and the genomic segments, the genetic mismatch of beth-1 was prevailingly lower than the current-system.

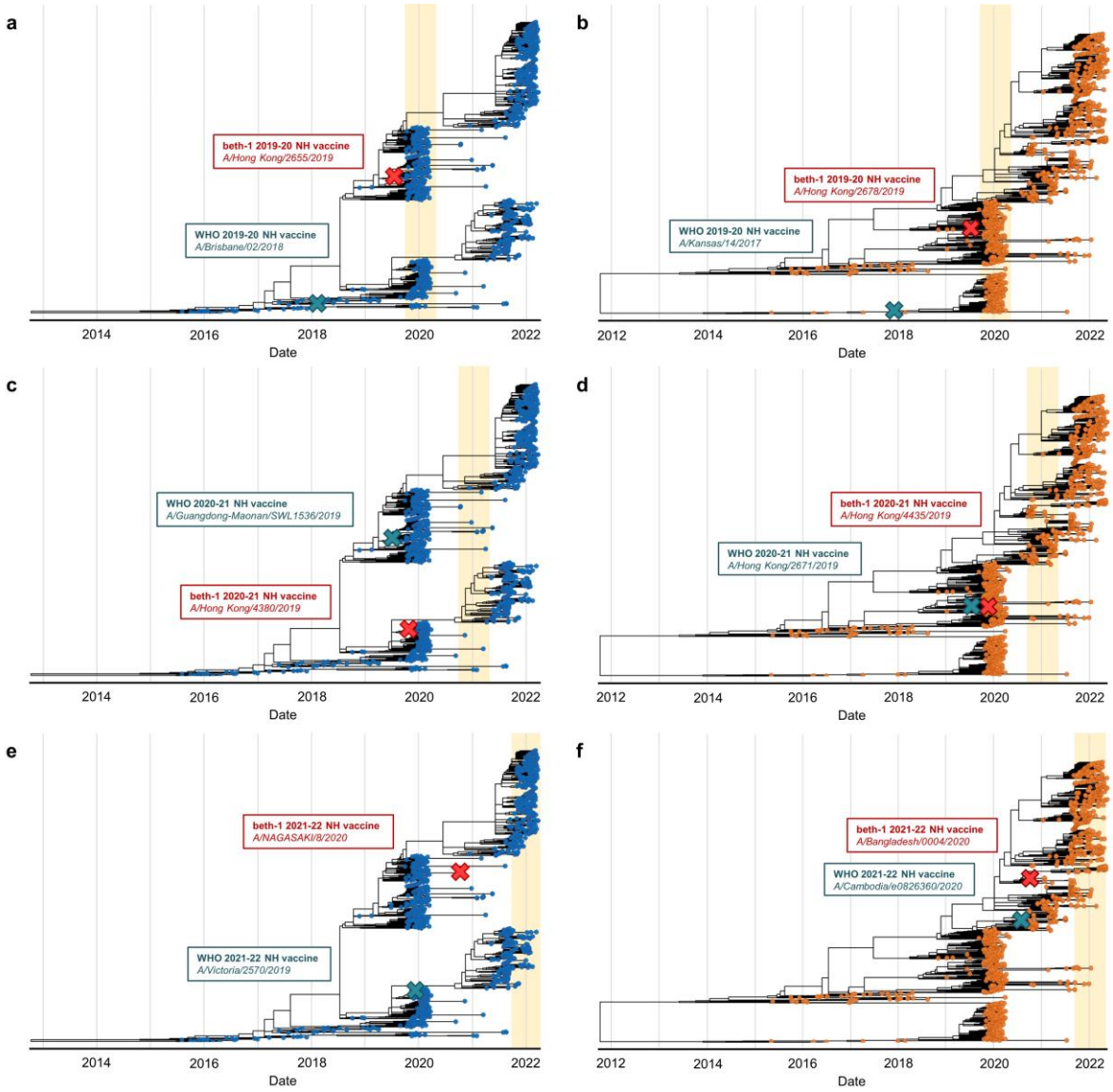

Fig. 4 | Prospectively predicted vaccine strains on phylogenetic tree from 2019/20 to 2021/22. a, 2019/20, pH1N1. **b**, 2019/20, H3N2. **c**, 2020/21, pH1N1. **d**, 2020/21, H3N2. **e**, 2021/22, pH1N1. **f**, 2021/22, H3N2. Predicted vaccine strains of the proposed method (beth-1) and current-system are marked in phylogenetic trees. Predictions were made prospectively for the coming epidemic season in the Northern Hemisphere (highlighted by yellow band in the background). The phylogeny relationship shows that beth-1's predictions are generally more advanced into the future. For the pH1N1, each prediction captures one of the two major clades in the epidemic seasons. For the H3N2, beth-1 captures the correct clades in 2019/20 while the current system does not; both systems locate the predominant clades for 2020/21 and 2021/22, while beth-1 strains are slightly more advanced into future.

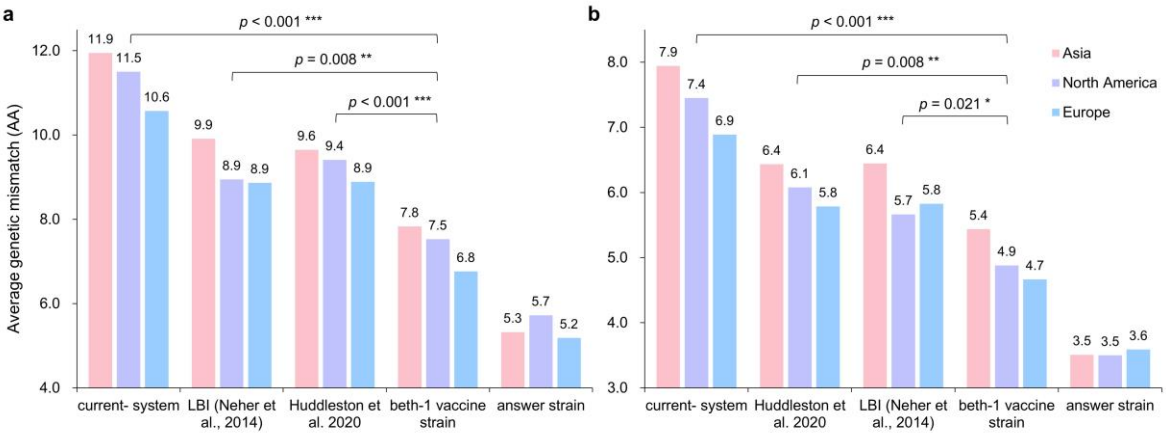

Fig. 5 | Comparison of beth-1 to alternative computational models for influenza virus evolution on HA of H3N2. a, HA full-length. **b**, HA epitopes. Retroactive season-to-season prediction is performed between 2002/03 and 2018/19 by alternative methods, including beth-1 (this study), Local Branching Index (LBI) (Neher et al 2014), the model of Huddleston et al (2020) and the current-system. Prediction accuracy is assessed by genetic mismatch of the predicted strains to the circulating virus in the upcoming epidemic, averaged over the 17 epidemic seasons. The beth-1 shows significantly lower genetic mismatch compared to the existing models on both HA full-length and epitopes of H3N2.

Methods

Dataset We downloaded genetic sequences of the influenza virus from the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAID)[24]. All samples were retrieved and analyzed if the strain has complete sequence and were isolated from the target epidemic seasons and geographical regions (**Extended Data Table 2**). The data of genetic sequences for pH1N1 spanned from 2009/10 to 2021/22, and for the H3N2 from 1999/2000 to 2021/22. Ten geographical regions in the Northern Hemisphere (NH) were considered, including North America (New York State, California State, Canada), Europe (United Kingdom, Germany, France), and Asia (Hong Kong SAR, South China provinces, Japan, Singapore). In 2020/21 and 2021/22, due to sharp decline of available samples in these regions, all sequences in NH were considered. Overall, the total number of genetic sequences used in analysis was 42,744 for the HA and 38,093 for the NA. Sequence alignment was performed by MEGA (7.0.26)[42]. All statistical analysis were conducted in R version 4.1.3[43]. All *p*-values reported are two-sided.

The vaccine strain prediction and selection model: beth-1 In our prior work[19], we used the *threshold* θ to detect the change-point of mutation prevalence in relation to a significant rise in epidemic level, and the *extended effective mutation period* (h) to measure the duration of a mutation to remain in selective advantage in the host population after reaching θ. Let $x_{jk}(t)$ denote amino acid residue or nucleotide type at site j in time t. $j \in J$, where J is the sequence length. $k \in K_j$, and K_j is the total number of unique substitutions observed at site j. $K_j \leq 4$ for nucleotide sequence, and $K_j \leq 20$ for amino acid sequence. Amino acid sequences are used in the prediction modelling of this study. Denote the prevalence of $x_{jk}(t)$ in host population as $p_{jk}(t)$. For a mutation $x_{jk}(t)$, let t_{jk}^0 denote the time point when $p_{jk}(t^0)$=0 and $p_{jk}(t^0+1) > 0$; and t_{jk}^θ denote the time when $p_{jk}(t^\theta) = \theta$. The *transition time* (τ) for a mutation $x_{jk}(t)$ is defined as,

$$\tau_{jk}(\theta, t) = t_{jk}^\theta - t_{jk}^0. \qquad \textbf{Eq. 1}$$

τ describes the duration that a mutation takes from its first emergence to reaching an influential prevalence in population; $\tau > 0$. The parameters (θ, h) are estimated from fitting the epidemic trend and a summary statistic of genetic activities, the g-measure[19], towards optimizing a goodness-of-fit statistic $S(\cdot)$. We have,

$$(\hat{\theta}, \hat{h}) = \arg \max_{\theta \in \Theta, h \in H} S[y(t), g(\theta, h, t)], \qquad \textbf{Eq. 2}$$

where $y(t)$ is a measure of epidemic level through time. $\Theta \in (0,1)$, and $\mathrm{H} = \{0,1,2,\ldots\}$. The *g-measure* is written as,

$$g(\theta, h, t) = \mathbf{m}^t \cdot \mathbf{p}^t = \sum_{j,k} m_{jk}(\theta, h, t) p_{jk}(t), \qquad \textbf{Eq. 3}$$

in which $m_{jk}(\theta, h, t)$ is a time-dependent indicator function of influential mutations (or *effective mutations*, EM)[19], such that $m_{jk}(\theta, h, t) \triangleq I\{t_{jk}^0 \leq t \leq t_{jk}^\theta + h, j \in J, k \in K_j\}$. Thus, the subset of influential mutations varies across epidemic seasons (**Extended Data Table 1**). We showed in other works that the *g*-measure is a good predictor for epidemic cycles of the A(H3N2)[19], A(H1N1)pdm09[44] and COVID-19[45,46]. In this study, $S(\cdot)$ is the R-square of a linear model, of which the response variable $y(t)$ is the annual sero-positivity rate, and independent variables include the *g*-measure, mean temperature, absolute humidity and season, fitted separately by geographical regions in the training set (**Extended Data Table 15**). When sufficient sequences and epidemic data are available, the time-varying reproduction number R_t is a preferred quantity for $y(t)$[45,46].

Prediction of future mutation prevalence can be made by solving a classical initial value problem of the differential equation,

$$\begin{cases} f'(t) = F\left[t, p_{jk}(t), \tau_{jk}(\theta, t)\right], & t > T \\ f(T) = \eta \end{cases}, \qquad \textbf{Eq. 4}$$

where $f(t)$ is a function describing mutation prevalence through time, $F\left[t, p_{jk}(t), \tau_{jk}(\theta, t)\right]$ is the velocity of the prevalence change, η is the initial value, and T is the latest observation time. Using Euler's method of approximation, the projected mutation prevalence at time T+1 for substitution k at position j is,

$$\hat{p}_{jk}(T+1) = \{p_{jk}(T) + F\left[T, p_{jk}(T), \hat{\tau}_{jk}(\theta, T)\right]\} \cdot C, \qquad \textbf{Eq. 5}$$

in which $k \in K_j$, and $j \in J$. $C = 1/\sum_{k \in K_j} \hat{p}_{jk}(T+1)$ is a normalization constant. $\hat{\tau}_{jk}(\theta, T)$ is estimated with history transition event at site j by the time of making prediction. When no history of transition event is available for the site, its transition time is estimated by the mean transition time of mutations from the same protein in the training data (**Extended Data Table 15**).

Eq. 4 and **5** describe the prediction step. In practice, the model form of $F(t)$ shall be chosen such that the training data can support a robust estimation. In the earlier seasons, only

a dozen influenza sequence samples were available each year in many regions. Thus, yearly interval is chosen and the simplest form of $F(t)$ as a rate is adopted. Specifically,

$$F\left[T, p_{jk}(T), \hat{\tau}_{jk}(\theta, T)\right] = \frac{\Delta p_{jk}(T)}{\Delta t} = \frac{p_{jk}(T) - p_{jk}[T - \hat{\tau}_{jk}(\theta, T)]}{\hat{\tau}_{jk}(\theta, T)} \quad . \qquad \textbf{Eq. 6}$$

For viruses with more abundant samples at denser time interval, other model form of $F(t)$ can be incorporated.

Based on the projected genome-wide fitness landscape given by **Eq. 5**, we can thus select the most advantageous mutations per site in T+1 using the mode estimator,

$$k_j^* = \arg\max_{k \in K_j} \hat{p}_{jk}(T+1).$$

This gives us a consensus strain to represent the projected future virus population,

$$\left\{x_j^c(T+1) \mid c = k_j^*\right\}. \qquad \textbf{Eq. 7}$$

Since a high mutation prevalence infers selective advantage of the mutation in population, the mode sequence carries all the in-advantage mutations at time T+1. The prediction model is trained using sample sequences from the South-east Asia region that is the source of influenza A epidemics[47,48]; for seasons after 2019/20, all Northern Hemisphere samples were used.

According to the guideline of vaccine preparation[49], the vaccine strains shall be selected among the available wildtypes. Thus, we locate the optimal wildtype virus for vaccine strains based on the predicted HA and NA sequences. We can use the prediction model for vaccine effectiveness by genetic distance (VE-GD)[20,21] to select the available present wildtype virus that maximizes the estimated VE against the predicted virus population.

A brief account of the VE-GD model is described here. The model captures the statistical relationship between VE and the genetic mismatch of vaccine strains against the circulating viruses, fitted with VE data collected from published observational studies over multiple seasons and genetic sequences matched to the same period and geographical region of the VE surveys[20-22]. Let $\{x_j^i\}$ denote a vaccine sequence indexed by i. The genetic distance d_s^i was measured by the average hamming distance on gene s between a vaccine strain i and the circulating viruses, $s \in S = \{HA, NA\}$. The effect of genetic mismatch was first estimated for individual genes by $VE \sim d_s^i$ using a linear model, resulting the estimated effect size $\hat{\beta}_s$. Next, the effect of multiple genes is combined through the polygenic risk score (PRS)[50,51]

to form an integrated predictor $\sum_{s\in S}\hat{\beta}_s\, d_s^i$. We showed that the VE-GD relationship for influenza virus was best fitted when the genetic distance was evaluated on a subset of EMs residing on epitope A or B for H3N2 and the EMs on antigenic sites for pH1N1[22], referred to as the predictor codon sites $W(t)$ (**Extended Data Table 1**). For a future season, using the projected $\hat{p}_j^k(T+1)$ in **Eq. 5** and fitted (θ, h) (**Extended Data Table 15**), we can thus obtain the predicted EMs and corresponding $W(T+1)$.

The genetic distance between a candidate vaccine virus *i* and $x_j^c(T+1)$ is,

$$d_s^i(T+1) = \sum_{j\in W(t),t\in[1,T+1]} I\{x_j^i \neq x_j^c(T+1)\}, \qquad \textbf{Eq. 8}$$

Thus, VE of a candidate vaccine strain *i* in season *T*+1 can be estimated by,

$$\widehat{VE}_i(T+1) \sim \sum_{s\in S}\hat{\beta}_s\, d_s^i(T+1). \qquad \textbf{Eq. 9}$$

With **Eq. 9**, the optimal wild-type virus $\{x_j^v\}$ can be selected by searching through all available strains for the one that maximizes the VE in *T*+1, integrating mutation information from both HA and NA. Hence, the estimated optimal wild-type virus is given by,

$$\{x_j^v\} = \arg\max_{i\in N}\{\, x_j^i \mid \widehat{VE}_i(T+1)\}, \qquad \textbf{Eq. 10}$$

where *N* is the total number of available wildtype viruses on and before time *T*.

Vaccine strains predicted by alternative models. The list of predicted strains by the beth-1 and the current-system can be found in **Extended Data Table 3**. Random selection is repeated ten times and the averaged genetic mismatch is reported. The answer strain is set as the closest wildtype to the consensus sequence in season *T*+1 obtained using the observed data. The predicted strains of LBI[16] are obtained by running the model's source code in python (https://github.com/rneher/FitnessInference) on the same training data as the beth-1. The predicted strains of Huddleston et al's model[15] (HI + mutational load) are directly retrieved from Github estimated by the original authors (https://github.com/elifesciences-publications/flu-forecasting). Two-sample *t*-test is used to compare log mismatch against circulating viruses between alternative prediction models in a given season. When comparing model performances over multiple seasons, paired *t*-test of two methods by season is used to control seasonal variation.

Phylogenetic tree To better visualize the predicted strains, we present them in the time-scaled maximum-likelihood phylogenies generated from TreeTime[52]. The input tree was built

in MEGA (7.0.26) using the neighbor-joining (NJ) approach with Jukes-Cantor gamma distance of shape parameter 4[42]. Genetic sequences for building the tree were sampled in proportion to continent distributions in the corresponding epidemic season, targeting a total number of 400 sequences per season for each of the pH1N1 and H3N2 subtype per season. In 2020/21, all available sequences in the NH were used.

Clinical samples for animal experiment Between October 2019 to February 2020, a total number of 117 positive H1 and 43 H3 nasopharyngeal swab samples were collected in the Prince of Wales Hospital, Hong Kong SAR. Ten samples from each of the H1 and H3 subtypes were randomly selected for virus isolation in hMDCK cells. The sequences of the HA gene from each virus was then determined by sanger sequencing. Phylogenetic analysis showed that the viruses belonged to the same clusters of their respective subtype in these isolates, of which HA ectodomain shared >98% amino acids similarity for the pH1N1 and >96% for H3N2. Thus, one pH1N1 and one H3N2 virus from these isolates were randomly picked for animal experiments. Human study ethics approval has been obtained from the Joint Chinese University of Hong Kong – New Territories East Cluster Clinical Research Ethics Committee.

Cell culture Humanized Madin-Darby canine kidney (hMDCK) cells[53] and human embryonic kidney (HEK) 293T cells were used in this study. Both cells were maintained in minimum essential medium (MEM) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS; Gibco), 25 mM HEPES, and 100 U/mL penicillin-streptomycin (PS; Gibco).

Virus rescuing by reverse genetics The H1N1 A/Puerto Rico/8/1934 (PR8) eight-plasmid reverse genetic system was used to produce the recombinant influenza virus with the predicted HA and NA genes[54]. Chimeric 6:2 recombinant viruses with six internal genes from PR8 (PB2, PB1, PA, NP, M, and NS) and 2 genes (HA and NA) from strain of interest were synthesized by Sangon Technology (Guangzhou, China) and were cloned into the pHW2000 vector[55]. The HEK 293T cells and hMDCK cells were then mixed at a ratio of 2:1 one-day before transfection and co-cultured in a 6-well plate until they reached 70% confluence. For each recombinant virus, 16 μL TransIT®-LT1 (Mirus) and 1 μg for each of the 8 plasmids encoding the corresponding virus fragments were mixed thoroughly for transfection. The medium was replaced with 1mL of MEM supplemented with 25 mM HEPES and 100 U/mL PS at 6-hour post transfection. At 24-hour post-transfection, another 1mL of MEM was added, supplemented 25 mM HEPES, 100 U/mL PS, and 1 μg/mL tosylphenylalanyl chloride methyl ketone (TPCK) trypsin (Sigma). At 72-hour post-transfection, cell supernatants were

inoculated into hMDCK cells maintained in MEM containing 25mM HEPES, 100 U/mL PS, and 1 μg/mL TPCK trypsin. The viruses were harvested at 72 hours after infection and titrated by plaque assay.

Immunization of the influenza vaccine virus in a mouse model The research protocol of animal experiment was carried out in strict accordance with the recommendations and was approved by the Teaching and Research Committee on the Use of Live Animals (CULATR 5598-20) of the University of Hong Kong. Batches of ten 8-10 weeks old female BALB/c mice were inoculated intraperitoneally (i.p) with 10^5 PFU of Addavax-adjuvant recombinant virus in 200 μL of phosphate-buffered saline (PBS; Gibco). At twenty-one days post immunization, peripheral blood was drawn from the immunized mice by cardiac puncture, and the serum was collected by centrifugation. All sera were treated with receptor destroying enzyme (RDE; Sigma) for 16-18 hours to reduce non-specific antibodies, then heated at 56 degrees for 30 minutes to inactivate the RDE residue. The serum was stored at -80 degrees for further experiments.

Immunogenicity assessment based on plaque reduction neutralization test hMDCK cells were used for virus titration by plaque assay and plaque reduction neutralization test (PRNT). hMDCK cells were prepared in a 12-well plate at least 24 hours before PRNT and cultured until obtaining a 100% confluent monolayer in each well. Two-fold serial dilutions of antiserum from 1:10 to 1:1280 were prepared, where each 100 μL was mixed with 100 PFU of viruses and incubated at 37°C for 1 hour. Cells were washed once with PBS and inoculated with corresponding virus-antiserum mixture for further incubation at 37°C for one hour. After that, the supernatant in each well was replaced with 3 mL of MEM supplied with a final concentration of 25 mM HEPES, 100 U/mL PS, 1% agarose gel, and 1 μg/mL TPCK trypsin. Against the live viruses, the highest dilution of the antiserum that inhibited at least 50% of the viral plaques ($PRNT_{50}$ titer) was recorded. The plate was inverted and incubated at 37°C for 48 hours. Finally, the cells were fixed with 4% formaldehyde and stained with 0.5% crystal violet for virus plaque counting. We recorded the highest dilution of the antiserum that inhibited at least 50% of the viral plaques as the $PRNT_{50}$ titer of the antiserum. Detailed information of the reagents and cell lines used in this study were listed in **Extended Data Table 16**.

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Data availability

All data used in this study is publicly available. Viral sequence data were downloaded from the global initiative on sharing all influenza data (GISAID) at *http://platform.gisaid.org/* and the accession numbers were provided in the online supplementary acknowledgment table.

Code availability

The code is available at *https://github.com/JingzhiLou/beth-1*. Access and use of the code is subject to a revocable, non-transferable, and limited right for the exclusive purpose of undertaking academic or not-for-profit research. Use of the Code or any part thereof for commercial purposes requires a Commercial License Agreement from Beth Bioinformatics (info@bethbio.com).

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Author contributions

M.H.W. conceived the study. M.H.W. and J.L. developed the prediction method. J.L. analyzed the data and prepared the results. C.K.P.M. designed the animal experiment. P.K.C. and Z.C. provided clinical samples. W.L. and C.K.P.M. conducted the immunology experiments. L.C., S. Z., H.Z., Y.Z., C.L. and Q.L. contributed to data collection and interpretation. E.Y., M.H.W.

and C.K.P.M. acquired funding. M.H.W. and J.L. wrote the original manuscript. C.K.P.M. and W.L. revised the manuscript. Z.C., R.W.Y.C., P.P.H.C., and M.K.C.C. reviewed and edited the manuscript. B.C.Y.Z. and E.K.Y. supervised the project.

Competing interests

M.H.W., J.L., M.K.C.C. and B.C.Y.Z. filed a related patent PCT/CN2019/091652. M.H.W. and B.C.Y.Z. are shareholders of Beth Bioinformatics Co., Ltd. B.C.Y.Z. is a shareholder of Health View Bioanalytics Ltd. The remaining authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

Extended data is available for this paper.

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