

Warning shot (about flu)

This seasonal illness shouldn't be taken lightly, especially by those with asthma, diabetes or heart disease

► The specialist: Dr. David C. Thomas on flu season and complications for chronic illnesses

The director of ambulatory care and training at Mount Sinai Medical Center, Thomas is a general internist who treats adults at the Center for Advanced Medicine, which specializes in integrated care. He focuses on the complexity of chronic illness.

► Who's at risk:

Influenza, or flu, is a seasonal virus that spreads through contact between people. In New York, flu season stretches from October until March. The season usually doesn't reach its peak until late December; peak case numbers then hold steady for the rest of the winter.

Contrary to popular belief, it isn't the cold weather itself that is responsible for flu season — it's being in close proximity to other people in close quarters. "You're in buildings more, with all the windows closed," explains Thomas. "You don't get the flu from going outside with your hair wet. You get the flu from being inside with other people."

A normal case of flu lasts from seven to 10 days. People often use the words flu and cold interchangeably, but they are different. "Flu isn't just a head cold," says Thomas. "Your whole body is affected, with symptoms like high fevers, lots of muscle aches and feelings of weakness."

Everyone who comes into contact with others is at risk of getting the flu. At the highest risk are the young and the old. "Their immunities are decreased," explains Thomas. The Health Department defines these categories explicitly, and advises extra precautions for young children, aged 6 months to 5 years, people over age 50 — and especially those over 65.

A serious problem is the additional risk flu poses for people with chronic illnesses like asthma, diabetes and heart disease. "What happens is that the flu puts more stress on their systems," says Thomas. "So if you have heart disease, the flu puts higher stress on your heart." In asthmatics, flu can cause asthma flares, in which the lungs constrict and the person can't breathe.

► What you can do:

Get vaccinated.

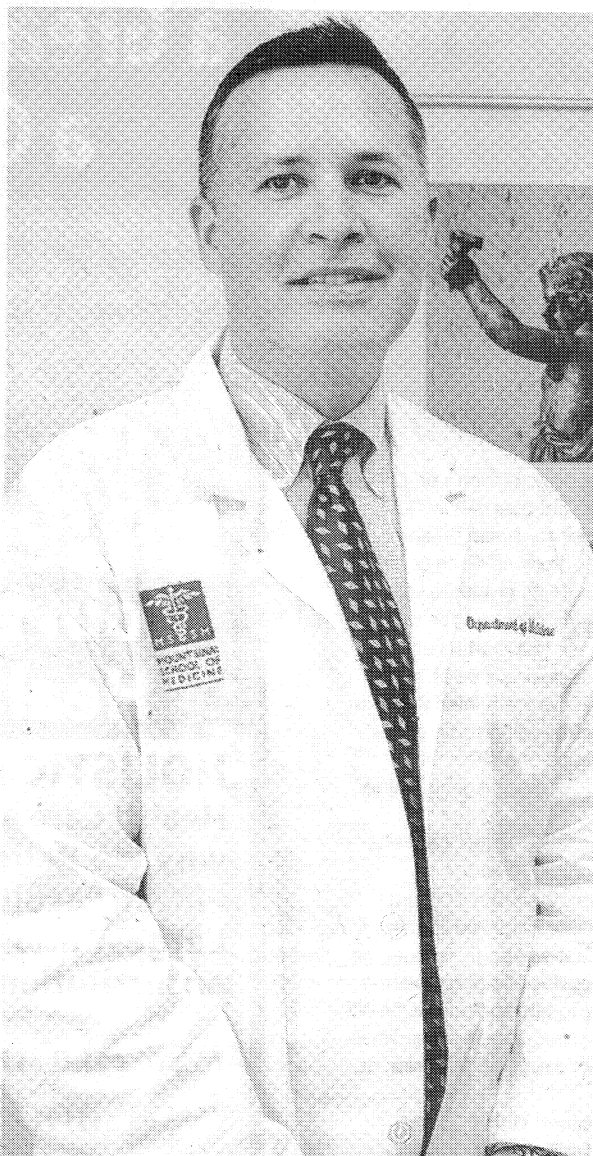
The city offers free flu shots at its walk-in clinics, and cheap shots at Health and Hospitals Corporation sites. Flu shots are almost always covered by insurance. "Get vaccinated once a year, and every year," says Thomas, because the vaccine contains different strains of the virus for each new flu season.

Don't spread flu.

That means following your mother's advice and washing your hands and covering your mouth. The flu is highly contagious and spreads when an infected person sneezes or coughs, releasing droplets from the nose or throat that then come in contact with a second person. If you're sick, don't ride the subway or go to work. Stay home until you're better.

Know your numbers.

A person should keep a log of their numbers. Thomas asks his patients, "Do you know your blood sugar, your blood pressure, your cholesterol numbers, weight and body mass index?"



Dr. David C. Thomas recommends that everyone get a flu vaccination — every year.

TANYA BRAGANTI

► Signs and symptoms:

A classic case of flu presents itself with symptoms that affect the whole body. "You'd have high fevers, lots of muscle aches and pains, and you'd be very weak," says Thomas. In some cases, flu is accompanied by symptoms like nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. "People often think they have the flu when they have a head cold," says Thomas. "With the flu, you're in bed, [and] you're out of it. Your whole body is affected."

Signs of a more serious case of flu would be difficulty breathing, being unable to eat and keep food down, and getting dehydrated. Another cause for concern, says Thomas, is "the worsening of your chronic medical conditions." People with asthma, diabetes and other chronic conditions should let their doctor know when they come down with the flu.

► Traditional treatment:

"The best treatment is prevention," says Thomas. Thanks to improved flu vaccines, that's largely possible. Flu shots contain an inactivated form of flu made up of three strains

BY THE NUMBERS:

This year, more than **25 million** Americans will get the flu; **200,000** of them will be hospitalized.

36,000 Americans die every year of flu or its complications.

More than **2,500** New Yorkers die annually of flu or pneumonia.

Source: Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

of the virus chosen by the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention to match the new season's strains as closely as possible.

Who should receive the vaccine? "Everyone," says Thomas. After all, everyone is at risk of infection. Flu shots are most essential for high-risk groups like the elderly, young children, people with chronic diseases and anyone who is immuno-suppressed. It's also important to get vaccinated if you are in a position where you could pass the virus on to someone else. Pregnant women, health-care workers and people who live in households with small children and the elderly should be vaccinated so they don't give the flu to those more vulnerable.

Thomas advises patients to get vaccinated once every flu season. "You cannot get the flu from the flu shot," he says. Typical side effects from the vaccine are redness or soreness at the vaccination site, or getting a sore arm.

Once you've come down with the flu, it usually has to run its course. "You can take Tylenol for the headaches and fevers," says Thomas, "but the key is lots of fluids. You have to stay very well hydrated." His advice for how to tell if you're fully hydrated: Your urine should be a light color, and you should never feel thirsty.

The prescription medicines Relenza and Tamiflu can combat the illness. "What they do is decrease the amount of time that you have the flu," says Thomas, "but they have to be started in the first two days. That's why getting to your doctor fast is critical."

► Questions for your doctor:

As we head into flu season, it's important to know whether you have any chronic health problems. Ask your doctor, "What are my medical conditions?" and follow it up with, "What are my numbers?" Too many times, people don't realize they have chronic conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure, which can be very negatively affected by the flu.

knowledge is power

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