Shingles, a disease caused by the Varicella zoster virus (VZV), the same virus that causes chicken pox, will affect an estimated one in three Americans at some point, and there are one million new cases in the U.S. each year. What’s worse, a new study from the journal Mayo Clinic Proceedings says [1] that people can get shingles more than once. After analyzing the medical records of nearly 1,700 patients with documented cases of shingles between 1996 and 2001, researchers found that over five percent of those affected by shingles suffered a second episode. On average, the second outbreak occurred eight years later.

After the chicken pox infection, VZV is never truly eliminated from the body, and instead lies dormant in the nerve root of the spinal column for decades until it’s prompted to reawaken, causing shingles. A weakened immune system caused by old age, illness, chemotherapy or even emotional stress can trigger the disease. Characterized by a blistery rash, shingles can lead to severe nerve pain that, when present for a month or many years, is referred to as post-herpetic neuralgia.

With more than half of shingles cases occurring in people over the age of 60, the CDC urges all individuals in this age group to get Zostavax, the shingles vaccine developed by Merck & Co. Only 11 percent of U.S. adults have heeded this advice, however. Though it reduces the risk of shingles in people over 60 by only 50 percent, the vaccine lessens symptom severity in vaccinated patients in whom shingles still manifests itself, and reduces the risk of post-herpetic neuralgia. The bottom line is that Americans over 60 shouldn’t wait [2] any further to get the vaccine.