What if Ebola became endemic in West Africa?

Last fall as the Ebola epidemic continued unabated, experts started discussing something that had never before been bandied about: the idea of Ebola becoming endemic in parts of West Africa. Endemic diseases, like malaria and Lassa fever in that region of Africa, are constant presences. Instead of surfacing periodically, as it always has before now, Ebola in an endemic form would persist in the human population, at low levels of transmission, indefinitely.

What would it mean exactly for Ebola to become endemic, and how would it change things?

The implications of an endemic Ebola are equally muddled. Epidemic risk management consultants Jody Lanard and Peter Sandman wrote on their website about one worst-case scenario: that visitors to the region will always be at risk of Ebola, which could result in “sparks” unpredictably landing in other countries and causing catastrophic economic and public health effects.

Ebola’s high mortality rates of 60 to 90 percent could actually prevent it from becoming endemic. (Mortality in the current epidemic has been pegged at about 70 percent.) If, on the other hand, the Ebola virus mutates so that it is less lethal, that could make it more likely to become endemic.

Dealing with endemic Ebola would necessitate the development and distribution of affordable and accurate Ebola diagnostic tests. Another important tool will be genomic sequencing, to track the virus on a long-term basis and determine whether and how it is spreading.

Read full, original article: Ebola’s Possible Future as an Endemic Disease