



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

March 2015 Monthly Report

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1 Executive summary

This report presents a monthly summary of diagnostic waiting times and activity across the NHS in England. This monthly report is part of a routine series of publications produced by NHS England.

The data presented in this report measures the current waiting times of patients still waiting for any of 15 key diagnostic tests or procedures at the month end. This data is split by number of weeks waiting, and by test. The waiting times reported are for those patients who have been referred for a test, but whose test had not taken place by the end of the reporting period. Referrals may be from a variety of sources including GPs.

One of the main measurements covered in this report is the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer for a diagnostic test, from time of referral.

This six week diagnostic wait was initially introduced as a 'milestone' from March 2008 towards achieving the standard Referral to Treatment wait of 18 weeks by December 2008, but diagnostic waiting times now form part of the 2013/14 NHS Constitution. This gives patients the legal right to treatment within 18 weeks of referral (18 week RTT) and as part of this, pledges that patients should not be required to wait 6 weeks or longer for a diagnostic test.

NHS England's planning guidance states that there is a threshold of 99% for this pledge. The financial penalty for non-delivery of the standard is set out in the NHS Standard Contract 2014/15.

The 15 key diagnostic tests included in this report are:

Imaging

- Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)
- Computerised Tomography (CT)
- Non-obstetric Ultrasound
- Barium Enema
- Dual-Energy X-Ray Absorptiometry (DEXA) Scan

Physiological Measurements

- Audiology Assessments
- Echocardiography
- Electrophysiology
- Neurophysiology – peripheral neurophysiology
- Respiratory Physiology – sleep studies
- Urodynamics – pressures & flows

Endoscopy

- Gastroscopy
- Colonoscopy
- Flexible Sigmoidoscopy
- Cystoscopy

For detailed descriptions of each diagnostic test please see the [collection guidance document](#).

Some of the key terms used throughout this report are outlined below:

- **6+ Waits**
A count of the number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer for a diagnostic test at month end from referral.
- **Activity**
A count of the number of diagnostic tests undertaken during the month.
- **Diagnostic Test**
A test or procedure of which the primary function is to identify a patient's disease or condition to allow a medical diagnosis to be made.
- **Waiting List**
A count of the number of patients that are waiting for a diagnostic test at the end of the month.

A more comprehensive glossary is available in the Annex.

All England figures quoted are commissioner based. Commissioner based returns reflect data for patients for whom English commissioners are responsible.

2 March 2015 Key Findings

- The total number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of March 2015 was 13,000. This was 1.5% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was not met this month.
- Compared with March 2014 the total number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer at the end of the month increased by 500, while the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer fell by less than 0.05 percentage points.
- In the last twelve months, the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 1.2% (in November 2014) and 2.4% (in January 2015).
- At the end of March 2015, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Electrophysiology, with 0.2% of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 6.9% of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer.
- An alternative measure of diagnostic waiting times is the average (median) waiting time. The estimated average time that a patient had been waiting for a diagnostic test was 2.0 weeks at the end of March 2015.
- There were 842,300 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of March 2015. This is an increase of 52,900 from March 2014. In the last twelve months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has continued to increase with an average monthly increase of 0.5%.
- March 2015 saw the largest number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test at the end of a month since data collection began in January 2006.
- A total of 1,706,500 diagnostic tests were undertaken in March 2015. This is an increase of 140,600 from March 2014. In the last twelve months activity has continued to increase with an average monthly increase of 0.7% (0.3% when adjusted for the number of working days).
- A total of 19 million key diagnostic tests were undertaken in the whole of 2014/15. This is a 5.9% increase from 2013/14.
- Princess Alexandra Hospital NHS Trust failed to submit any diagnostic data this month, due to issues with their Patient Administration System.

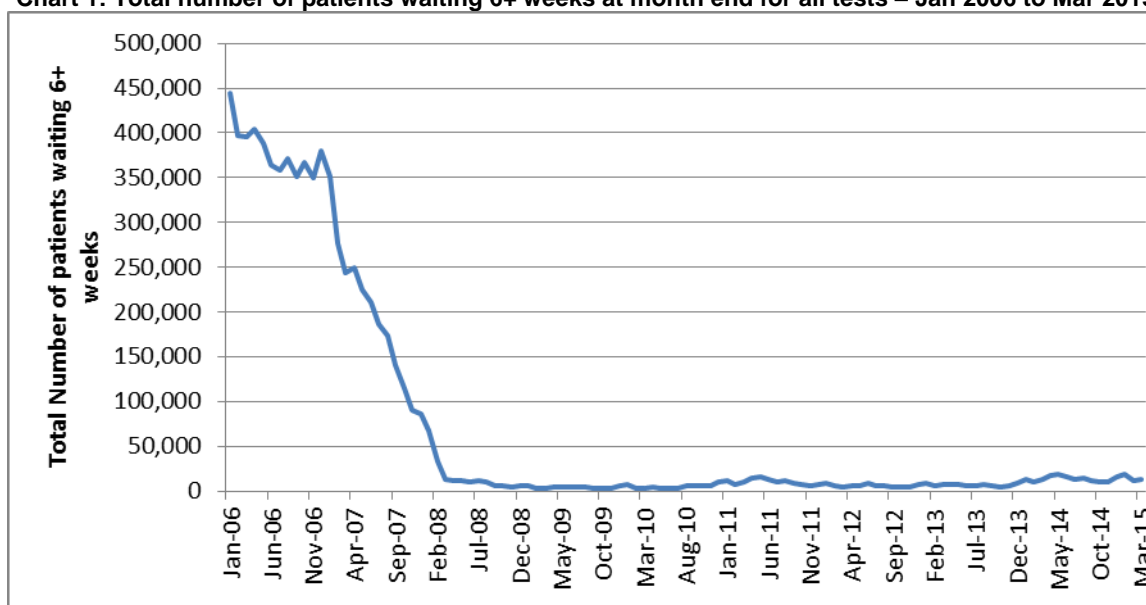
3 National Trends

This section analyses trends in monthly diagnostic waiting times and activity data that has been collected since January 2006.

3.1 6+ Week Waits

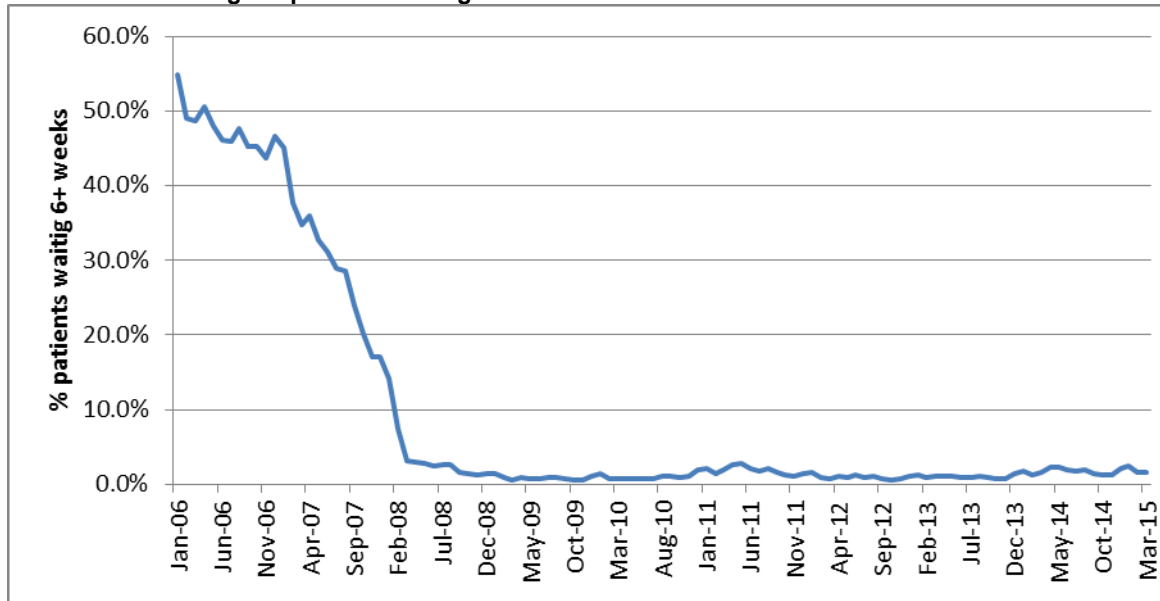
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008, before maintaining a slight average monthly reduction (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait longer than 6 weeks for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 there have been fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer. Between October 2013 and May 2014 there was a significant increase in the number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer. That number has since continued to fluctuate. In March 2015 there was a small increase in the number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests – Jan 2006 to Mar 2015



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer shows a similar drop between January 2007 and the 6 week milestone in March 2008 before stabilising (Chart 2). In the last twelve months, the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 1.2% (in November 2014) and 2.4% (in January 2015). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

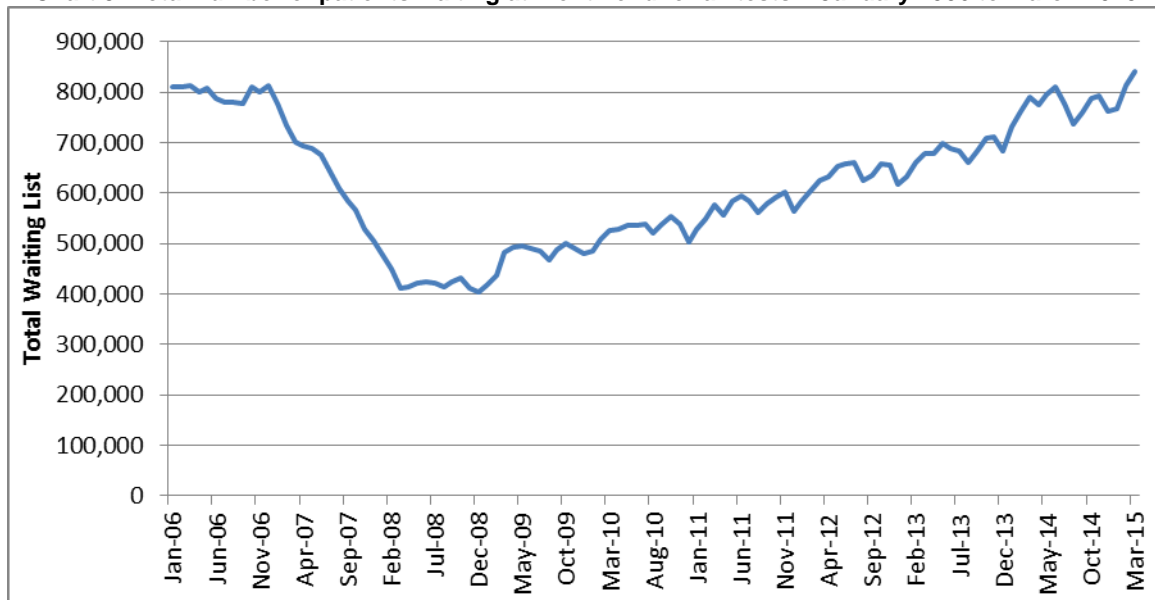
Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests – Jan 2006 to Mar 2015



3.2 Total Waiting List

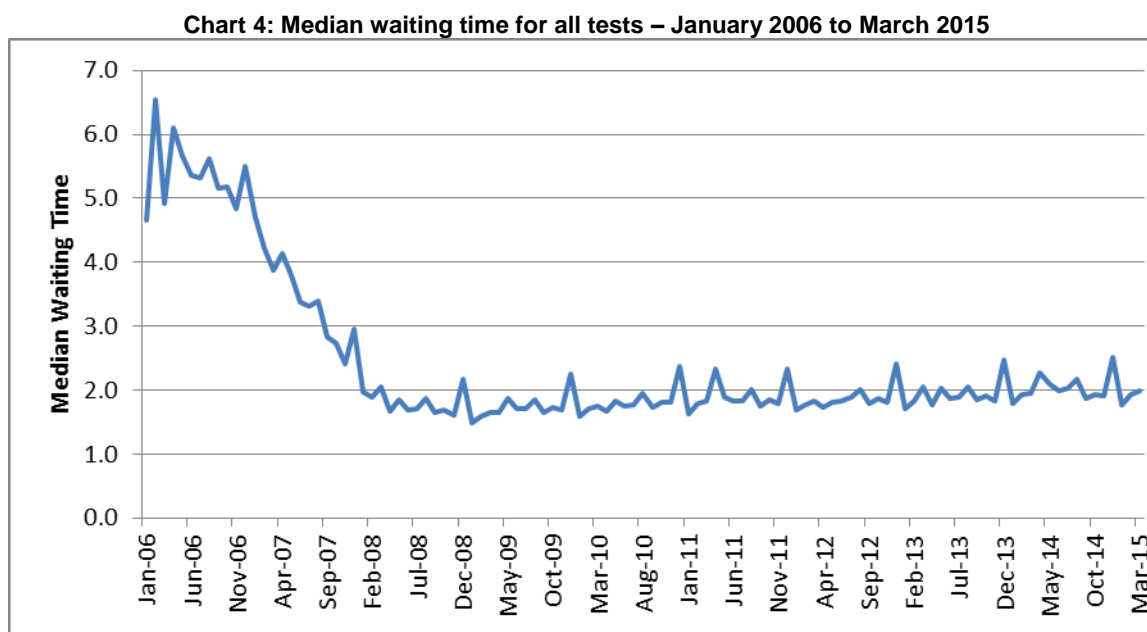
- 3.2.1. As seen with the number and proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer, the total number of patients waiting at the month end dropped dramatically between January 2007 and the 6 week milestone in March 2008 (Chart 3). Between March 2008 and January 2009 the total waiting list remained stable, after which the underlying trend has shown an increase. In the last twelve months the average monthly increase was 0.5%

Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests – January 2006 to March 2015



3.3 Median Waiting Time

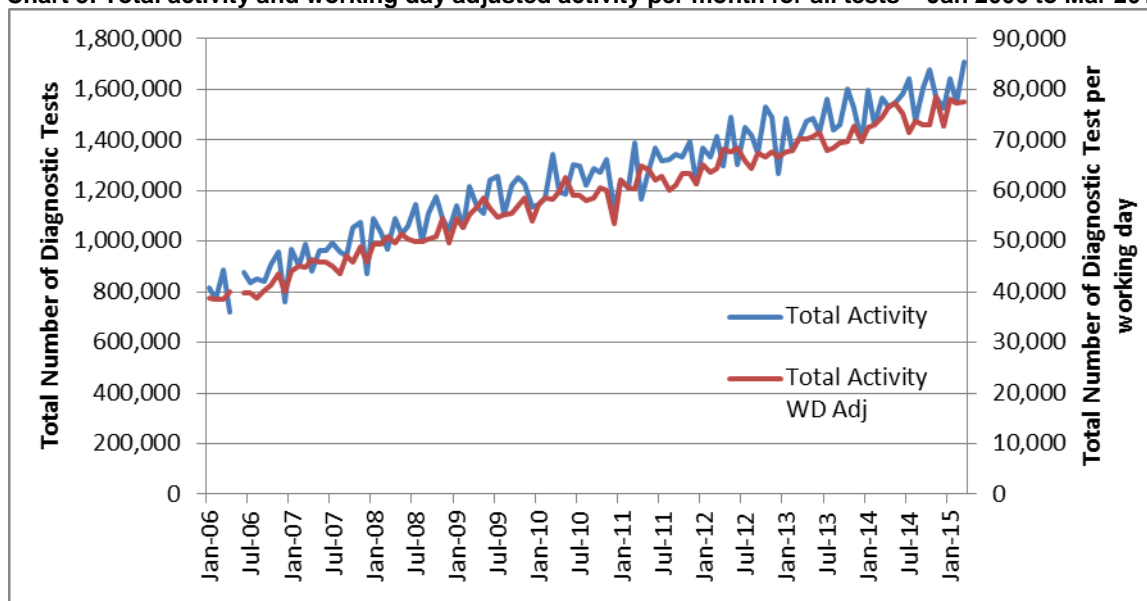
- 3.3.1. The average (median) waiting time displays a similar trend to the total waiting list and 6+ waits. After a rapid decrease in the first two years leading to the 6 week milestone, the median waiting time has remained stable (Chart 4). The data shows significant increases during December every year, as a result of the increased number of bank holidays and resulting staff shortages. In the last twelve months, the median waiting time has remained stable at around 2.0 weeks, with a high of 2.5 weeks (December 2014) and a low of 1.9 weeks (September 2015).



3.4 Total Activity

- 3.4.1. The monthly activity figure can fluctuate significantly month to month, with particularly notable decreases in December due to the bank holidays. However, the underlying trend has shown an increase since January 2006. If the data is adjusted to show activity per working day, the monthly variation becomes less pronounced. (Chart 5).
- 3.4.2. Monthly activity has increased over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.7%, while the average monthly increase in activity per working day was 0.3%.

Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests – Jan 2006 to Mar 2015



Please note that activity data was not collected in May 2006 and as a result all activity time series graphs will show missing values for that month

- 3.4.3. In the previous twelve months, individual tests have shown slight changes in activity. The largest changes have been for Electrophysiology, where the average monthly decrease was 2.1%. The tests with the largest growth in activity were Sleep Studies and Gastroscopy, where the average monthly increase was 1.2% for both tests (Table 1).

Table 1: Total Activity by test – March 2014 and March 2015

	Mar-14	Mar-15	Average monthly growth
MRI	240,684	263,843	0.8%
CT	380,179	420,047	0.8%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	539,508	582,071	0.6%
Barium Enema	2,873	2,970	0.3%
Dexa Scan	31,611	34,901	0.8%
Audiology Assessments	100,578	106,396	0.5%
Echocardiography	100,968	112,062	0.9%
Electrophysiology	3,530	2,733	-2.1%
Peripheral Neuropsychology	15,792	16,960	0.6%
Sleep Studies	9,348	10,797	1.2%
Urodynamics	6,673	6,963	0.4%
Colonoscopy	35,101	37,860	0.6%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	20,132	21,266	0.5%
Cystoscopy	25,513	25,782	0.1%
Gastroscopy	53,436	61,849	1.2%
All Tests	1,565,926	1,706,500	0.7%

4 March 2015 Data

This section analyses the March 2015 diagnostic waiting times and activity data, and includes comparisons between tests, area teams, providers and commissioners.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of March 2015, there were a total of 13,000 patients waiting 6 weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 1.5% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with March 2014, the number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer increased by 500, while the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer decreased by less than 0.05 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with March 2014, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Flexi Sigmoidoscopy which increased by 5.0 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Electrophysiology, which decreased by 1.9 percentage points. (Table 2)

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2014 and March 2015.

	Mar-14	Mar-15	Difference (%age points)
MRI	1.2%	0.8%	-0.4%
CT	0.7%	0.6%	-0.1%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	1.6%	0.3%	-1.2%
Barium Enema	0.2%	0.3%	0.2%
Dexa Scan	2.1%	0.5%	-1.6%
Audiology Assessments	1.1%	1.5%	0.3%
Echocardiography	1.7%	2.7%	1.0%
Electrophysiology	2.1%	0.2%	-1.9%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	1.9%	0.8%	-1.2%
Sleep Studies	2.4%	3.6%	1.2%
Urodynamics	6.1%	6.9%	0.8%
Colonoscopy	2.3%	5.7%	3.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	1.8%	6.8%	5.0%
Cystoscopy	5.7%	6.5%	0.8%
Gastroscopy	2.6%	5.6%	3.0%
All Tests	1.6%	1.5%	0.0%

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with March 2014, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Endoscopy with an increase of 3.2 percentage points. Physiological Measurements increased by 0.5 percentage points, while Imaging Tests decreased by 0.8 percentage points. See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types. (Table 3)

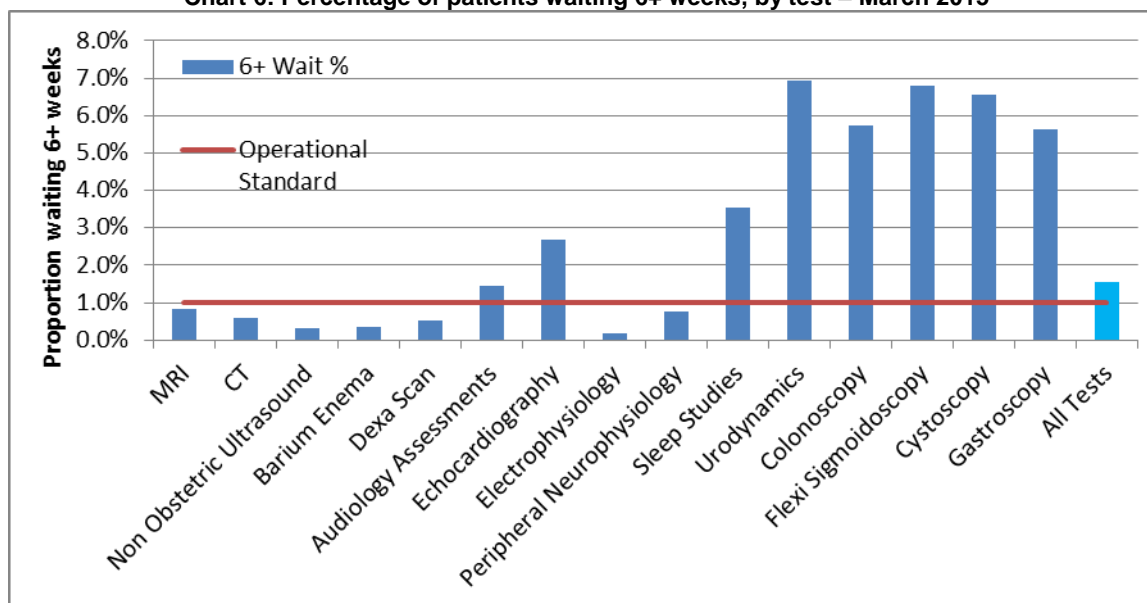
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – March 2014 and March 2015

	Mar-14	Mar-15	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	1.4%	0.5%	-0.8%
Physiological Measurement	1.7%	2.2%	0.5%
Endoscopy	2.8%	6.0%	3.2%
All Tests	1.6%	1.5%	0.0%

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.5. The operational standard that less than 1% of patients should wait 6 weeks or more from referral for a diagnostic test was met this month in 7 of the 15 key tests. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Electrophysiology (0.2%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Urodynamics (6.9%). (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2015



- 4.1.6. 56 of the 154 Acute Trusts that submitted data for March 2015 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.7. 96 of the 211 Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is the same as the number of CCGs that failed the standard in the previous month, but 25 more than in March 2014.
- 4.1.8. 18 of the 25 area teams failed to meet the 1% operational standard. (Table 4)

Table 4: March 2015 Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity by Area Team, Commissioner based data.

Region	Area Team	Number of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer at month end	Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median Waiting Time
North	Durham, Darlington and Tees	782	3.6%	21,772	43,568	2.2
Midlands & East	Birmingham and The Black Country	1,398	3.4%	40,654	72,381	2.2
South	Bristol, North Somerset, Somerset and South Gloucestershire	829	3.2%	25,668	51,400	2.1
Midlands & East	Arden, Herefordshire and Worcestershire	624	2.0%	30,598	51,621	2.1
South	Surrey and Sussex	794	2.0%	39,687	86,133	1.9
London	London	2,574	1.9%	136,572	263,947	2.1
Midlands & East	Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire	444	1.6%	27,899	60,469	1.7
North	South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw	351	1.6%	22,155	51,717	2.1
Midlands & East	East Anglia	530	1.6%	33,587	69,703	1.9
Midlands & East	Shropshire and Staffordshire	333	1.5%	22,831	51,530	2.0
North	Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear	476	1.4%	33,806	66,976	2.0
Midlands & East	Leicestershire and Lincolnshire	383	1.4%	27,383	45,739	2.1
South	Devon, Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	351	1.4%	25,312	54,329	2.0
Midlands & East	Hertfordshire and The South Midlands	510	1.3%	38,222	74,904	2.0
North	North Yorkshire and Humber	394	1.3%	30,331	54,083	2.0
South	Wessex	479	1.3%	37,828	87,288	1.9
North	Greater Manchester	549	1.2%	45,458	87,275	2.1
Midlands & East	Essex	229	1.1%	20,181	48,014	1.9
North	Cheshire, Warrington and Wirral	191	0.9%	20,462	44,273	1.8
South	Bath, Gloucestershire, Swindon and Wiltshire	219	0.9%	25,039	40,962	2.2
South	Thames Valley	149	0.6%	24,970	56,355	2.0
North	Merseyside	102	0.5%	19,904	47,977	1.9
North	Lancashire	75	0.4%	20,851	44,850	1.7
North	West Yorkshire	98	0.3%	34,349	70,464	1.8
South	Kent and Medway	84	0.3%	33,130	64,582	2.1
England (including all Independent Sector Providers)		12,969	1.5%	842,269	1,706,500	2.0

- 4.1.9. The area team with the largest proportion of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer was Durham, Darlington and Tees Area Team, where 3.6% of patients had been waiting that long.
- 4.1.10. The area teams with the smallest proportions of patients waiting 6 weeks or longer were Kent and Medway Area Team, and West Yorkshire Area Team. The proportion was 0.3% for both area teams.
- 4.1.11. Feedback from NHS trusts has indicated that variations can exist between different area teams due to a variety of reasons from machines breaking down to staff shortages in trusts that usually only affect one area team.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of March 2015 there were a total of 842,300 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 52,900 (6.7%) from March 2014. This was the largest number of patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of a month since data collection began in 2006.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 35.2% of the total waiting list, or 296,341 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Barium Enema, which accounted for 0.2% of the total waiting list, or 1,442 patients (Table 5)
- 4.2.3. There have been large increases in the number of patients waiting for certain tests. The largest growth has been for Gastroscopy tests where the waiting list increased by 34.8%, compared with March 2014. The largest reduction has been for Dexa Scans, where the waiting list decreased by 11.8%,

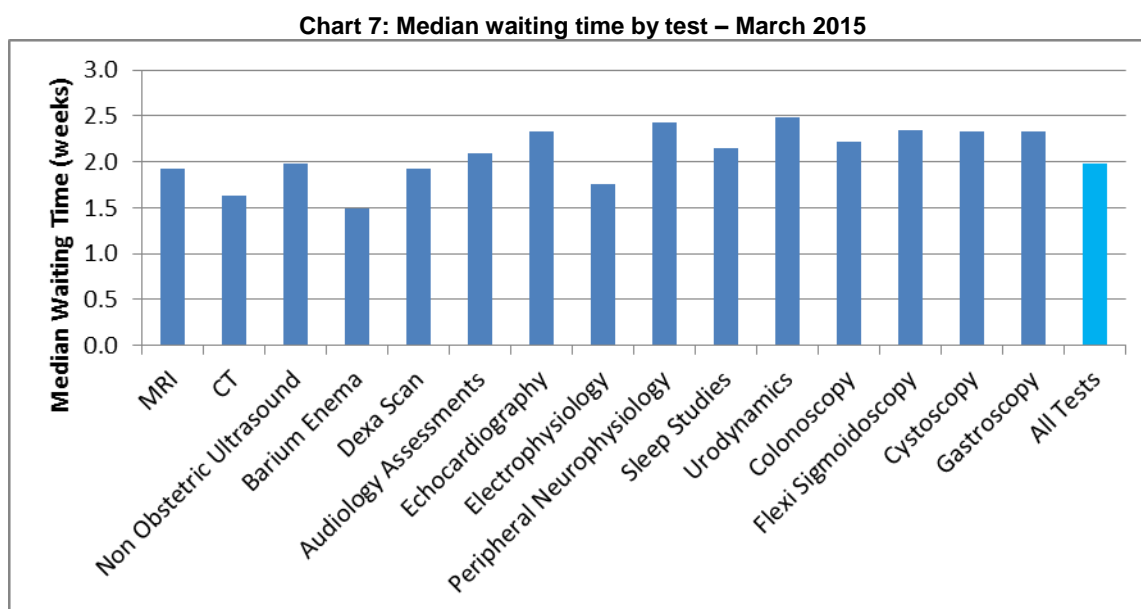
Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – March 2014 and March 2015

	Mar-14	Mar-15	Growth (%age)
MRI	156,946	165,161	5.2%
CT	94,637	104,809	10.7%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	291,360	296,341	1.7%
Barium Enema	1,329	1,442	8.5%
Dexa Scan	27,907	24,627	-11.8%
Audiology Assessments	44,236	47,894	8.3%
Echocardiography	51,453	56,102	9.0%
Electrophysiology	1,772	1,590	-10.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,151	16,354	1.3%
Sleep Studies	5,233	6,025	15.1%
Urodynamics	4,153	4,370	5.2%
Colonoscopy	28,578	35,245	23.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	15,354	18,496	20.5%
Cystoscopy	13,092	13,682	4.5%
Gastroscopy	37,191	50,131	34.8%
All Tests	789,392	842,269	6.7%

Please note that Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

- 4.3.1. At the end of March 2015 the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.0 weeks from time of referral. This is an increase from the previous month, where the median was 1.9 weeks. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 1.5 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 2.5 weeks. (Chart 7)



- 4.3.2. The area teams with the shortest median waiting time were Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Area Team and Lancashire Area Team. Both area teams had estimated median waiting times of 1.7 weeks.
- 4.3.3. The area teams with the longest median waiting times were Durham, Darlington and Tees Area Team, Birmingham and the Black Country Area Team and Bath, Gloucestershire, Swindon and Wiltshire Area Team. All three area teams had estimated median waiting times of 2.2 weeks.

4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,706,500 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during March 2015. This is an increase of 140,600 (9.0%) from the same period last year (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound with 582,071 tests taking place. This accounted for 34.1% of all activity in March 2015. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 2,733 tests taking place. This accounted for or 0.2% of all activity this month.
- 4.4.3. A total of 19 million diagnostic tests were undertaken in the whole of 2014/15. This is a 5.9% increase from 2013/14.

Table 6: Total Activity & Growth by test

	Mar-15	Mar-14	YTD 14/15	YTD 13/14	Growth Mar 15 vs Mar 14	Growth YTD 14/15 vs YTD 13/14	Adjusted Growth Mar 15 vs Mar 14	Adjusted Growth YTD 14/15 vs YTD 13/14
MRI	263,843	240,684	2,923,242	2,667,286	9.6%	9.6%	4.6%	10.0%
CT	420,047	380,179	4,675,703	4,286,892	10.5%	9.1%	5.5%	9.5%
Non Obstetric Ultrasound	582,071	539,508	6,565,866	6,314,999	7.9%	4.0%	3.0%	4.4%
Barium Enema	2,970	2,873	34,785	37,351	3.4%	-6.9%	-1.3%	-6.5%
Dexa Scan	34,901	31,611	388,885	377,379	10.4%	3.0%	5.4%	3.5%
Audiology Assessments	106,396	100,578	1,198,652	1,202,400	5.8%	-0.3%	1.0%	0.1%
Echocardiography	112,062	100,968	1,268,299	1,185,157	11.0%	7.0%	5.9%	7.4%
Electrophysiology	2,733	3,530	30,340	32,846	-22.6%	-7.6%	-26.1%	-7.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,960	15,792	195,461	183,371	7.4%	6.6%	2.5%	7.0%
Sleep Studies	10,797	9,348	117,440	105,028	15.5%	11.8%	10.3%	12.3%
Urodynamics	6,963	6,673	78,327	83,591	4.3%	-6.3%	-0.4%	-5.9%
Colonoscopy	37,860	35,101	420,972	401,278	7.9%	4.9%	3.0%	5.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	21,266	20,132	238,772	228,756	5.6%	4.4%	0.8%	4.8%
Cystoscopy	25,782	25,513	295,956	295,927	1.1%	0.0%	-3.5%	0.4%
Gastroscopy	61,849	53,436	616,009	586,525	15.7%	5.0%	10.5%	5.4%
All Tests	1,706,500	1,565,926	19,048,709	17,988,786	9.0%	5.9%	4.0%	6.3%

Please note that Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

5 Annex

5.1 Methodology

6.1.1. NHS England compiles diagnostic waiting time and activity data through a central return. Data collected includes:

- The number of patients waiting at the month end, split by test and week.
- Total activity classified as either; Waiting List tests (excluding planned), Planned tests, or Unscheduled tests.

6.1.2. Providers submit data to NHS England via Unify2 where it checked and signed off by commissioners. For further details on how the data is collected and the Unify2 system, please refer to the [Data Quality and Methodology Statement](#).

5.2 Data Revision

6.2.1. Revisions to published figures are released on a six-monthly basis and in accordance with the NHS England Analytical Services (Operations) team's revision policy. For more information on the revision policy please refer to the [Unify2 Revisions Policy Document](#).

5.3 Data Availability

6.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. The next publication of this report and accompanying data will be 10th June 2015. [A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here](#).

6.3.2. In addition to monthly publication, diagnostic waiting time and activity data is also published in a quarterly census and annual report.

6.3.3. [Quarterly census data can be found here](#).

6.3.4. [Annual Imaging and Radiodiagnostics data can be found here](#).

5.4 Glossary

Area Team

A geographical area of NHS England with direct commissioning responsibilities for GP services, dental services, pharmacy, and certain aspects of optical services.

Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)

A group of GP practices, which working with other healthcare professionals and in partnership with local communities and local authorities, commission NHS services for patients with in their local communities.

Endoscopy

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Colonoscopy; Flexi sigmoidoscopy; Cystoscopy and Gastroscopy.

Imaging

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI); Computed Tomography (CT); Non-obstetric ultrasound; Barium Enema and DEXA Scan.

Median Waiting Time

A measurement of the average time a patient is required to wait for a diagnostic test. The median is the middle value when waiting times are put in numerical order. 50% of patients will wait less than the median. The median is the preferred measurement of average waiting time as it is less susceptible to extreme values than the mean.

Physiological Measurement

A categorisation of diagnostic tests that include; Audiology Assessments; Echocardiology; Electrophysiology: Peripheral Neurophysiology; Sleep Studies and Urodynamics.

Provider

An organisation that provides NHS treatment or care, for example, an NHS Acute Trust, Mental Health Trust, Community provider, or an Independent Sector organisation.

5.5 Feedback welcomed

We welcome feedback on the content and presentation of statistics within this report and those published on the NHS England website.

If you have any comments on this, or any other issues regarding these statistics, then please email unify2@dh.gsi.gov.uk

Alternatively, we welcome your comments via our user feedback form.

Feedback about the user's experiences of using these statistics is available here.

5.6 Additional Information

[Full details of diagnostics data for individual organisations are available here.](#)

For press enquiries please contact the NHS England media team on 0113 825 0958 or 0113 825 0959. Email enquiries should be directed to nhsengland.media@nhs.net

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) statistician responsible for producing these data is:

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