

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

May 2019 Monthly Report

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Prepared by: Performance Analysis Team (Central)
NHS England and NHS Improvement

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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 and NHS Improvement.

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 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 six weeks or longer for a diagnostic test.

NHS England and NHS Improvement's planning guidance states that there is a threshold of 1% for this pledge. The financial penalty for non-delivery of the standard is set out in the NHS Standard Contract 2019/20.

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 six 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.

1.1 National Statistics

The UK Statistics Authority has designated these statistics as National Statistics, in accordance with the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and signifying compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

Designation can be broadly interpreted to mean that the statistics:

- meet identified user needs;
- are well explained and readily accessible;
- are produced according to sound methods; and
- are managed impartially and objectively in the public interest.

Once statistics have been designated as National Statistics it is a statutory requirement that the Code of Practice shall continue to be observed.

2 May 2019 Key Findings

- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of May 2019 was 43,200. This was 4.1% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month. This was the worst performance in the last 12 months and since February 2008.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or longer was not met this month.
- Compared with May 2018 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 15,300, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 1.4 percentage points.
- In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 2.3% (October 2018 and February 2019) and 4.1% (this month).
- At the end of May 2019, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Electrophysiology with 0.5%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 17.7% of patients waiting six 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 2.2 weeks at the end of May 2019.
- There were 1,059,900 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of May 2019. This is an increase of 34,600 from May 2018. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test continues to show a slight increasing trend with an average monthly increase of 0.3%.
- A total of 1,994,500 diagnostic tests were undertaken in May 2019. This is an increase of 55,900 from May 2018. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.2%.

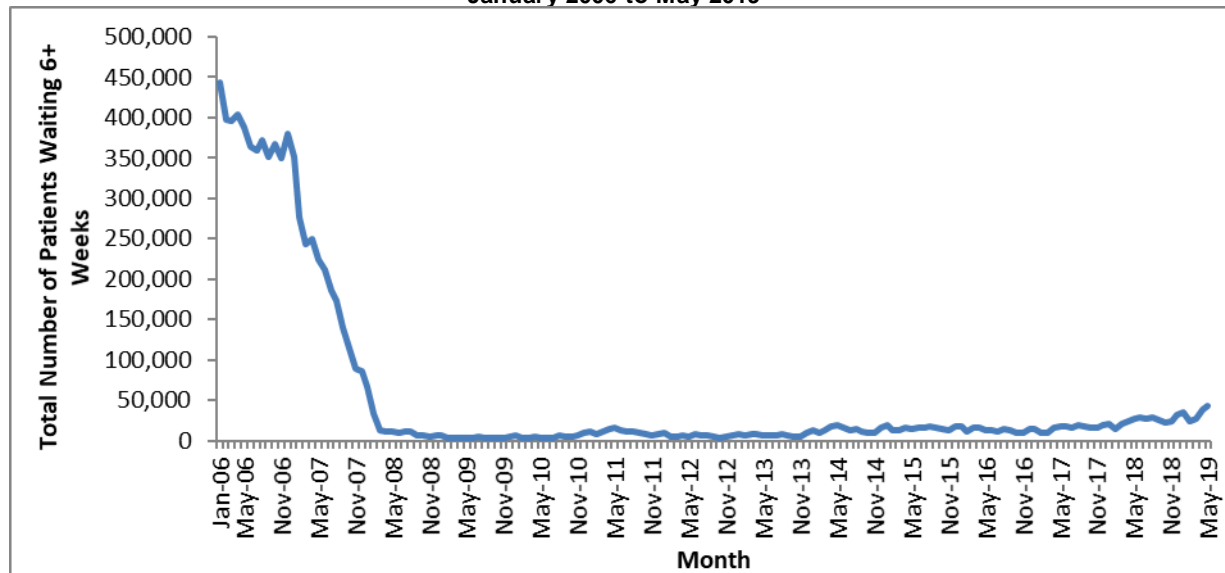
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

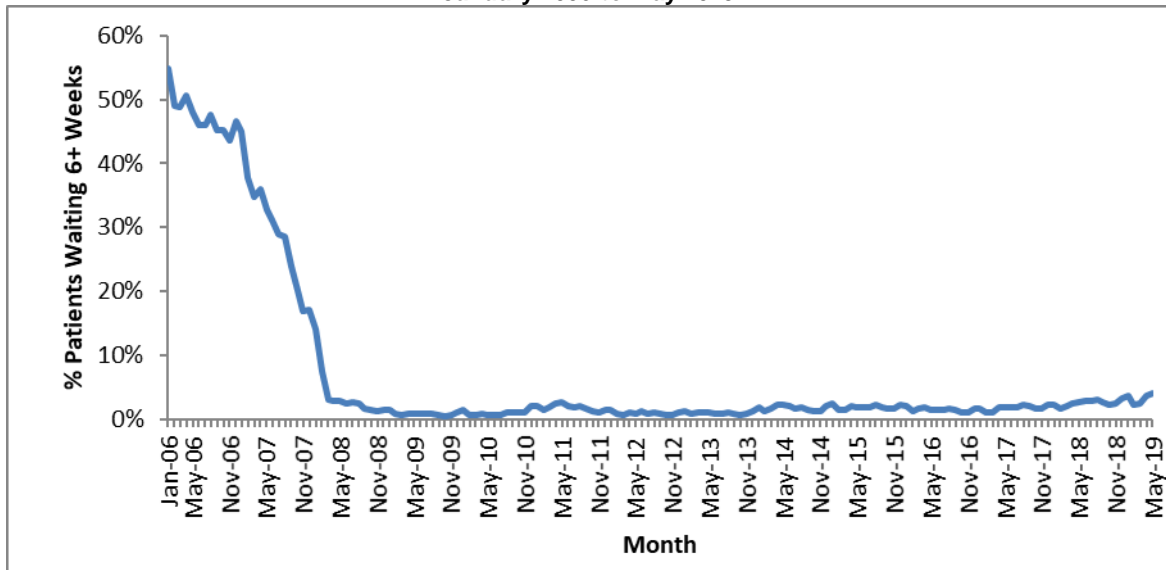
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or longer dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait longer than six 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 six weeks or longer. Between October 2013 and May 2014 there was a significant increase in the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer. That number has since continued to fluctuate. In May 2019 there was an increase of 5,200 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer from the previous month.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to May 2019



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six 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 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer at the end of a month has varied between 2.3% (October 2018 and February 2019) and 4.1% (this month). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

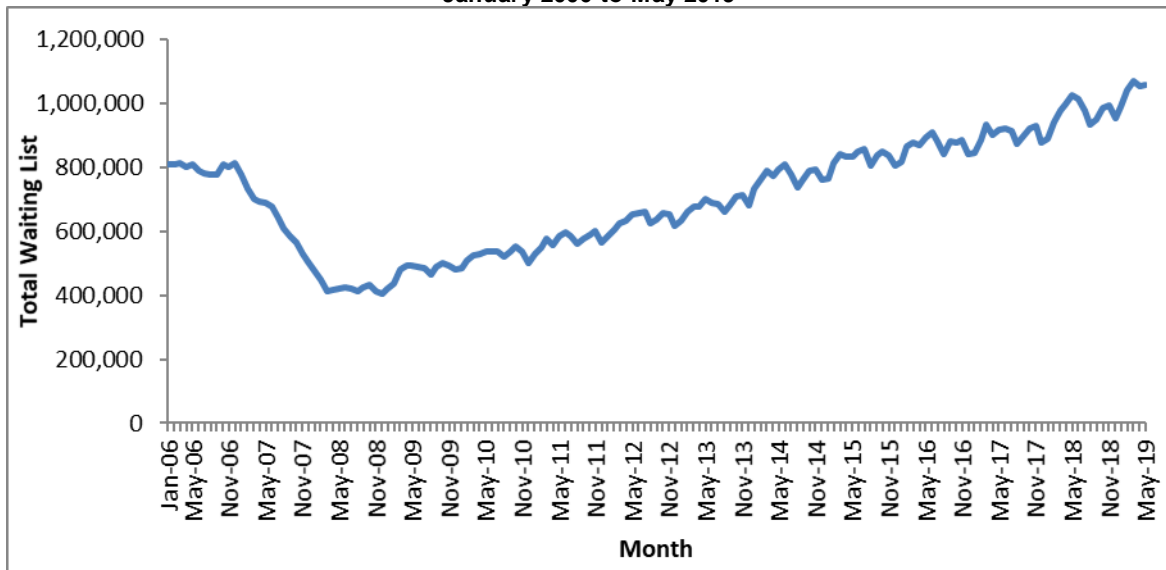
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to May 2019**



3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As seen with the number and proportion of patients waiting six 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 12 months the average monthly increase was 0.3%.

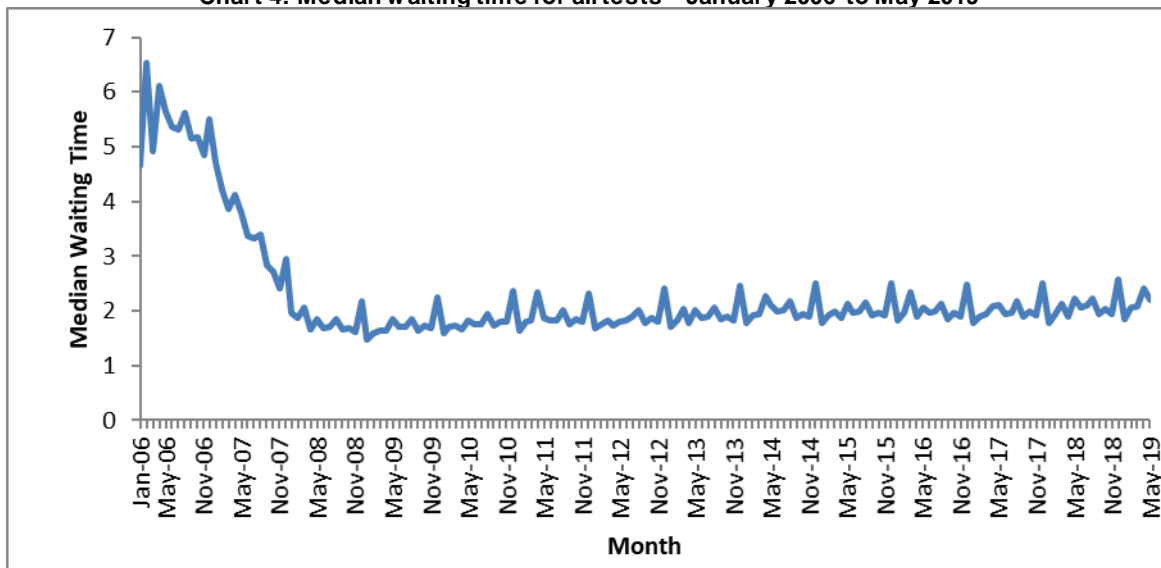
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to May 2019**



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 12 months, the median waiting time has remained stable at around 2.2 weeks, with a high of 2.6 weeks (December 2018) and a low of 1.8 weeks (January 2019).

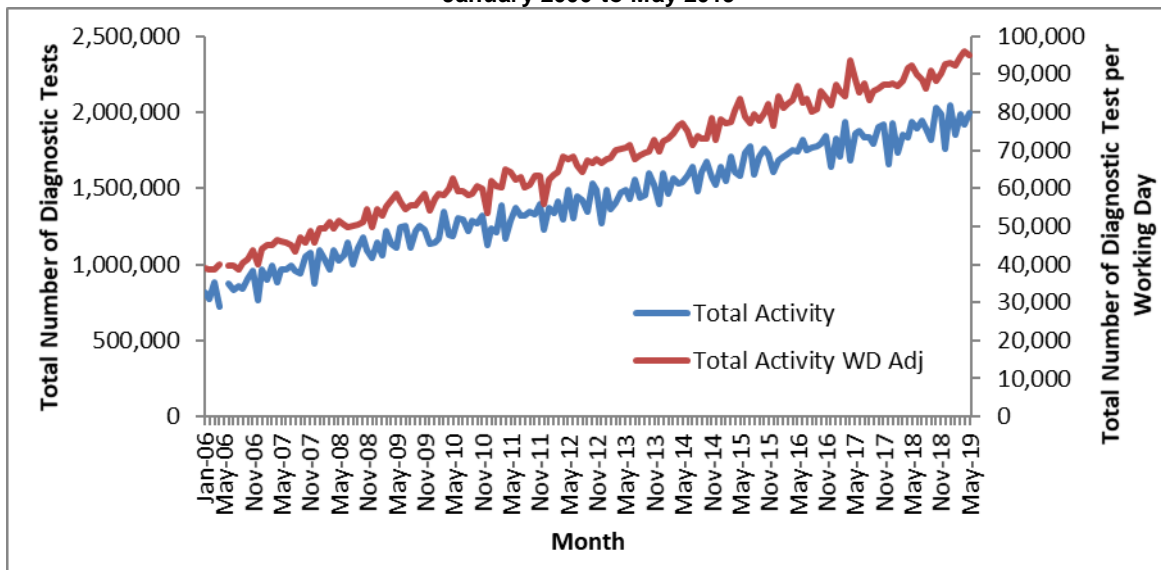
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to May 2019



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 slightly increased over the last 12 months. The average monthly increase in activity was 0.2%.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to May 2019**



Note: Activity data was not collected in May 2006 and all activity time series graphs will show missing values for that month

3.4.3. In the previous 12 months, individual tests have shown slight changes in activity. The test with the largest increase in activity was Barium Enema, where the average monthly increase was 3.2%. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Electrophysiology, where the average monthly decrease was 1.9% (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – May 2018 and May 2019

	May-18	May-19	Average monthly growth
MRI	303,891	308,505	0.1%
CT	508,121	528,969	0.3%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	647,247	668,150	0.3%
Barium Enema	2,160	3,156	3.2%
Dexa Scan	38,579	40,338	0.4%
Audiology Assessments	109,469	107,326	-0.2%
Echocardiography	131,291	140,653	0.6%
Electrophysiology	3,102	2,468	-1.9%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,526	20,046	0.2%
Sleep Studies	11,091	10,967	-0.1%
Urodynamics	6,736	7,006	0.3%
Colonoscopy	43,778	45,678	0.4%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	27,125	26,520	-0.2%
Cystoscopy	26,454	25,612	-0.3%
Gastroscopy	59,993	59,116	-0.1%
All Tests	1,938,563	1,994,510	0.2%

4 May 2019 Data

This section analyses the May 2019 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 May 2019, there were a total of 43,200 patients waiting six weeks or longer from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 4.1% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month. This was the worst performance in the last 12 months and since February 2008.
- 4.1.2. Compared with May 2018, the number of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 15,300, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer increased by 1.4 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with May 2018, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Urodynamics, which increased by 8.8 percentage points. The tests with the largest decrease was Audiology Assessments which decreased by 0.9 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – May 2018 and May 2019

	May-18	May-19	Difference (%age points)
MRI	3.0%	3.5%	0.5
CT	2.6%	3.3%	0.6
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	1.6%	2.3%	0.7
Barium Enema	0.6%	1.6%	1.1
Dexa Scan	0.7%	1.1%	0.4
Audiology Assessments	2.8%	1.9%	-0.9
Echocardiography	3.1%	8.9%	5.8
Electrophysiology	0.9%	0.5%	-0.4
Peripheral Neurophysiology	1.7%	5.0%	3.3
Sleep Studies	5.0%	5.4%	0.4
Urodynamics	8.9%	17.7%	8.8
Colonoscopy	7.1%	10.5%	3.4
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	4.6%	7.7%	3.1
Cystoscopy	6.6%	9.7%	3.1
Gastroscopy	5.1%	7.7%	2.5
All Tests	2.7%	4.1%	1.4

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with May 2018, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Physiological Measurement with an increase of 3.5 percentage points. Endoscopy increased by 3.0 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 0.6 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

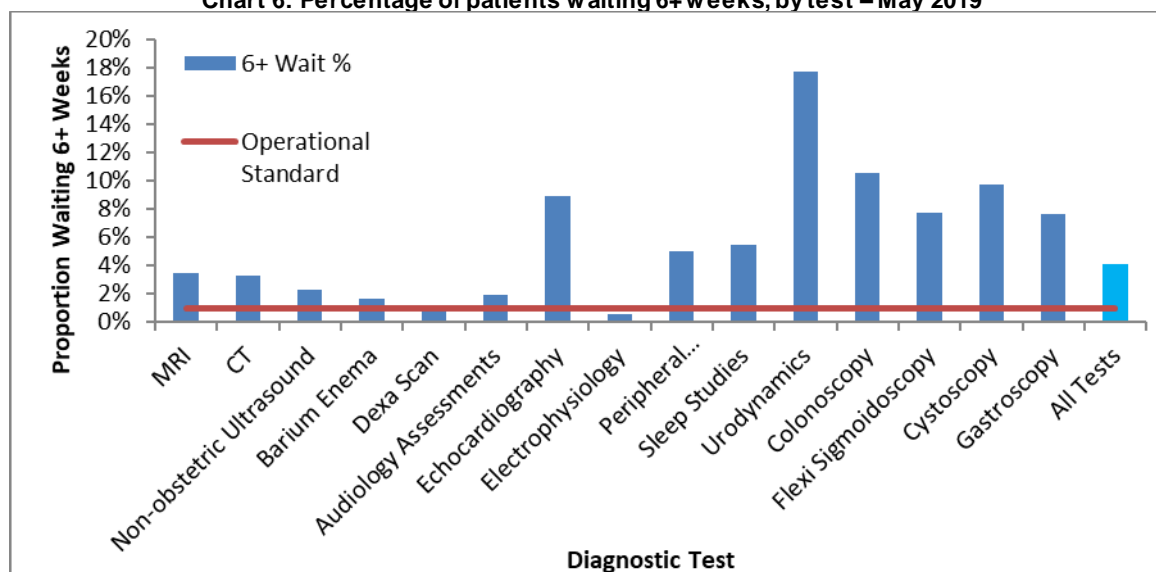
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – May 2018 and May 2019

	May-18	May-19	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	2.1%	2.7%	0.6
Physiological Measurement	3.1%	6.6%	3.5
Endoscopy	5.9%	8.9%	3.0
Total	2.7%	4.1%	1.4

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.5. The operational standard that less than 1% of patients should wait six weeks or more from referral for a diagnostic test was met in 0 of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Electrophysiology (0.5%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer was Urodynamics (17.7%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – May 2019



4.1.6. 94 of the 147 acute trusts that submitted data for May 2019 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. 167 of the 192 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 3 more than the number of Commissioners that failed the standard in the previous month and 55 more than in May 2018².

¹ Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

² 196 Commissioners in May 2018

4.1.8. None of the seven NHS England and NHS Improvement Regional Teams met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or longer for a diagnostic test varied by region between 2.7% and 8.0% (Table 4).

Table 4: May 2019 Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity by Regional Team *

Region	Number of patients waiting six weeks or longer at month end	Percentage of patients waiting six weeks or longer at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median waiting time
London	6,406	3.5%	181,859	305,916	2.2
South West	8,550	8.0%	106,274	190,113	2.4
South East	6,501	4.3%	150,194	298,285	2.1
Midlands	4,992	2.7%	186,992	366,018	2.1
East of England	3,909	3.3%	119,232	220,998	2.3
North West	4,384	3.1%	142,053	273,571	2.2
North East and Yorkshire	8,248	4.9%	168,587	323,982	2.3
England	43,195	4.1%	1,059,869	1,994,510	2.2

*Includes all independent sector providers.

4.1.9. Feedback from NHS trusts has indicated that variations can exist between different regions due to a variety of reasons from machines breaking down to staff shortages in trusts that usually only affect one area region.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of May 2019 there were a total of 1,059,900 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 34,600 (3.4%) from May 2018.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 36.5% of the total waiting list, or 386,400 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.1% of the total waiting list, or 1,100 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – May 2018 and May 2019

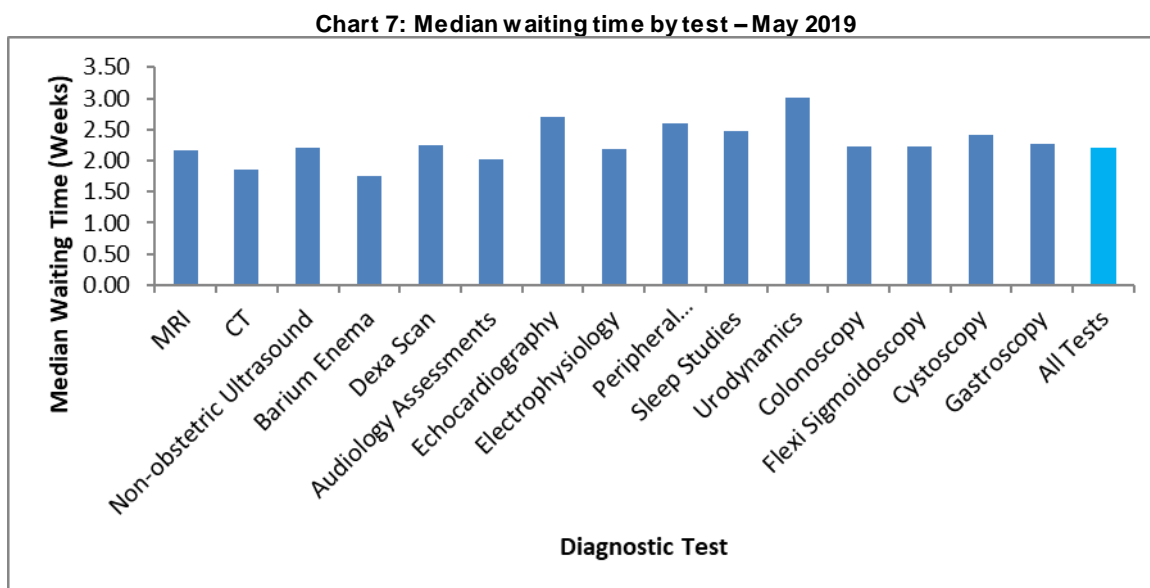
	May-18	May-19	Growth (%age)
MRI	211,144	208,205	-1.4%
CT	134,754	138,147	2.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	368,110	386,389	5.0%
Barium Enema	1,227	1,604	30.7%
Dexa Scan	33,586	31,979	-4.8%
Audiology Assessments	47,989	43,771	-8.8%
Echocardiography	76,882	87,663	14.0%
Electrophysiology	1,684	1,131	-32.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,254	20,724	2.3%
Sleep Studies	8,782	9,851	12.2%
Urodynamics	4,371	5,137	17.5%
Colonoscopy	39,115	42,927	9.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,939	19,775	10.2%
Cystoscopy	14,328	15,202	6.1%
Gastroscopy	45,114	47,364	5.0%
All Tests	1,025,279	1,059,869	3.4%

Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. There have been large increases in the number of patients waiting for certain tests. The largest percentage growth has been for Barium Enema where the waiting list increased by 30.7% compared with May 2018. The largest reduction has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list decreased by 32.8%.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of May 2019, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.2 weeks from the time of referral. This is a decrease of 0.2 compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 1.7 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 3.0 weeks (Chart 7).



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 1,994,500 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during May 2019. This is an increase of 55,900 (2.9%) from May 2018 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 668,200 tests taking place. This accounted for 33.5% of all activity in May 2019. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 1,100 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.1% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 4.6% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – May 2018 and May 2019

	May-19	May-18	YTD 19/20	YTD 18/19	Growth May 19 vs May 18	Growth YTD 19/20 vs YTD 18/19	Adjusted Growth May 19 vs May 18	Adjusted Growth YTD 19/20 vs YTD 18/19
MRI	308,505	303,891	607,373	593,546	1.5%	2.3%	1.5%	2.3%
CT	528,969	508,121	1,037,868	990,016	4.1%	4.8%	4.1%	4.8%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	668,150	647,247	1,307,752	1,253,998	3.2%	4.3%	3.2%	4.3%
Barium Enema	3,156	2,160	6,061	4,131	46.1%	46.7%	46.1%	46.7%
Dexa Scan	40,338	38,579	79,075	75,317	4.6%	5.0%	4.6%	5.0%
Audiology Assessments	107,326	109,469	212,439	214,008	-2.0%	-0.7%	-2.0%	-0.7%
Echocardiography	140,653	131,291	274,414	257,307	7.1%	6.6%	7.1%	6.6%
Electrophysiology	2,468	3,102	5,135	6,086	-20.4%	-15.6%	-20.4%	-15.6%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,046	19,526	39,122	37,577	2.7%	4.1%	2.7%	4.1%
Sleep Studies	10,967	11,091	21,669	21,973	-1.1%	-1.4%	-1.1%	-1.4%
Urodynamics	7,006	6,736	13,458	12,818	4.0%	5.0%	4.0%	5.0%
Colonoscopy	45,678	43,778	88,909	84,810	4.3%	4.8%	4.3%	4.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	26,520	27,125	52,221	52,156	-2.2%	0.1%	-2.2%	0.1%
Cystoscopy	25,612	26,454	50,743	50,891	-3.2%	-0.3%	-3.2%	-0.3%
Gastroscopy	59,116	59,993	115,836	115,802	-1.5%	0.0%	-1.5%	0.0%
All Tests	1,994,510	1,938,563	3,912,075	3,770,436	2.9%	3.8%	2.9%	3.8%

Note: 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

5.1.1. NHS England and NHS Improvement 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.

5.1.2. Providers submit data to NHS England and NHS Improvement via SDCS where it is checked and signed off by commissioners. For further details on how the data is collected and the SDCS system, please refer to the [NHSE Collection Guidance](#).

5.2 Data Revision

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

Revisions were last published in April 2019 for the months July 2018 through to January 2019.

5.3 Data Availability

5.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. The next publication of this report and accompanying data will be 9th May 2019. [A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here.](#)

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

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

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

5.4 Glossary

Area Team

A geographical area of NHS England and NHS Improvement 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 within 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 england.nhsdata@nhs.net

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 Consultation

The future of the Quarterly Diagnostics Census and Monthly Diagnostics Waiting Times and Activity Returns are under consultation. Find out more at: <https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/consultation/diagnostics-census-waiting-times-activity-return>

The deadline for consultation was 5th April 2018. NHS England and NHS Improvement will publish a response to the feedback received as part of this consultation once results have been analysed.

5.7 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:

Katie Tither

Performance Analysis Team (Central), NHS England and NHS Improvement
Room 5E15, Quarry House, Quarry Hill, Leeds LS2 7UE

Email: england.nhsdata@nhs.net