

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

March 2020 Monthly Report

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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 more 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 more 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 more 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 March 2020 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and data for the current reporting period may therefore not be comparable to previous periods.
- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of March 2020 was 85,400. This was 10.2% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or more was not met this month.
- Compared with March 2019 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 59,000, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 7.7 percentage points.
- In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more at the end of a month has varied between 2.8% (February 2020) and 10.2% (March 2020).
- At the end of March 2020, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology with 3.7%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 25.3% of patients waiting six weeks or more.
- 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 3.1 weeks at the end of March 2020.
- There were 838,600 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of March 2020. This is a decrease of 233,200 from March 2019. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has shown an increasing trend, but as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the waiting list fell significantly in March.
- A total of 1,520,700 diagnostic tests were undertaken in March 2020. This is a decrease of 465,600 from March 2019. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the majority of last 12 months, before falling sharply in March 2020.
- The following organisations did not submit Diagnostics (DM01) data this month:
 - North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust (RGN)
 - Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust (RHW)

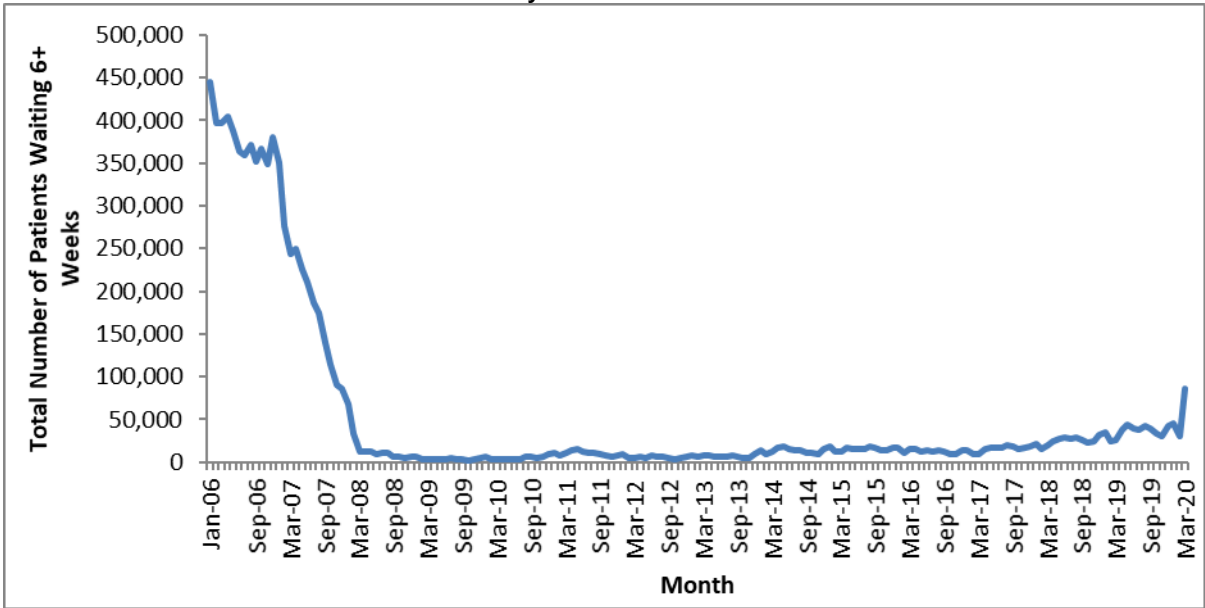
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

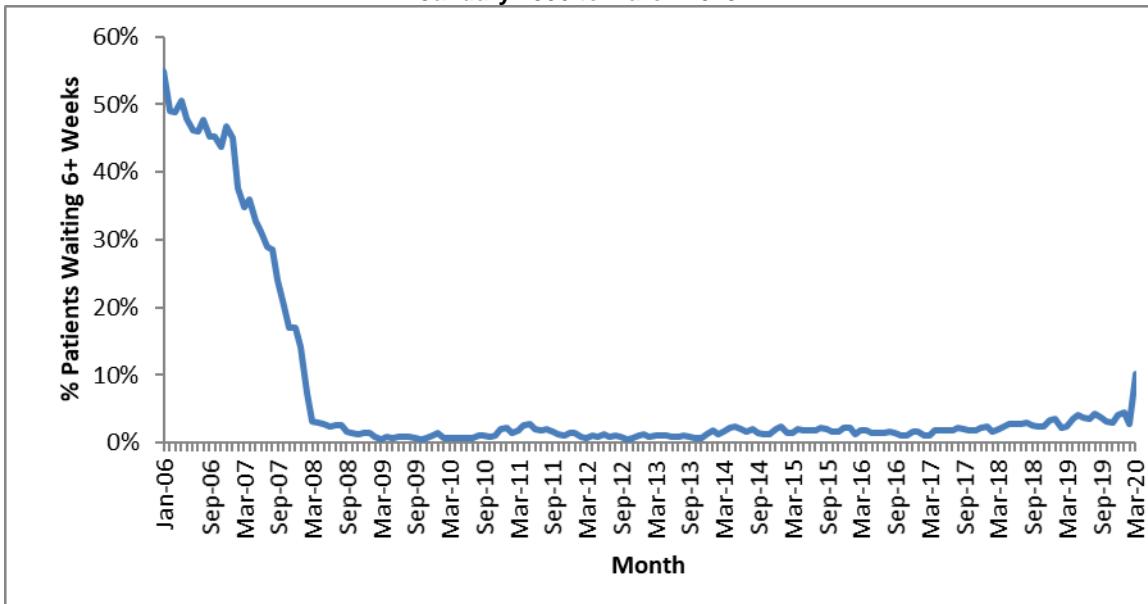
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more 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 more. Between October 2013 and May 2014 there was a significant increase in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more. That number has since continued to fluctuate. In March 2020 there was an increase of 55,600 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to March 2020



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more 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 more at the end of a month has varied between 2.8% (February 2020) and 10.2% (March 2020). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

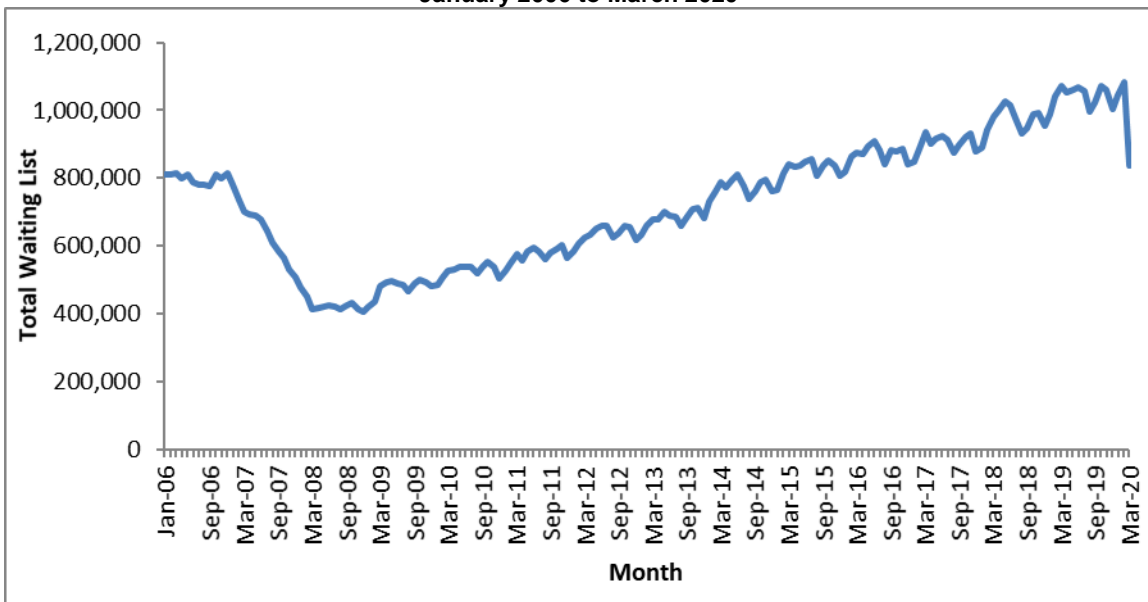
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2020**



3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As seen with the number and proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more, 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, then dropping sharply in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 response.

**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2020**

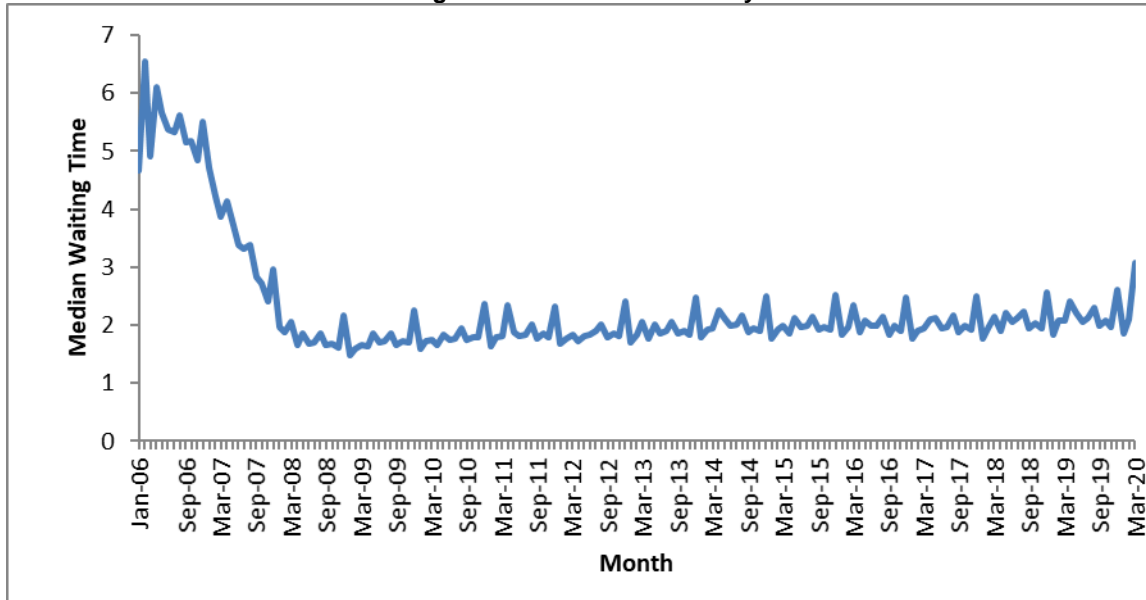


3.3 Median Waiting Time

3.3.1. The average (median) waiting time displays a similar trend to the total waiting list and 6 weeks or more 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 3.1 weeks (March 2020) and a low of 1.9 weeks (January 2020).

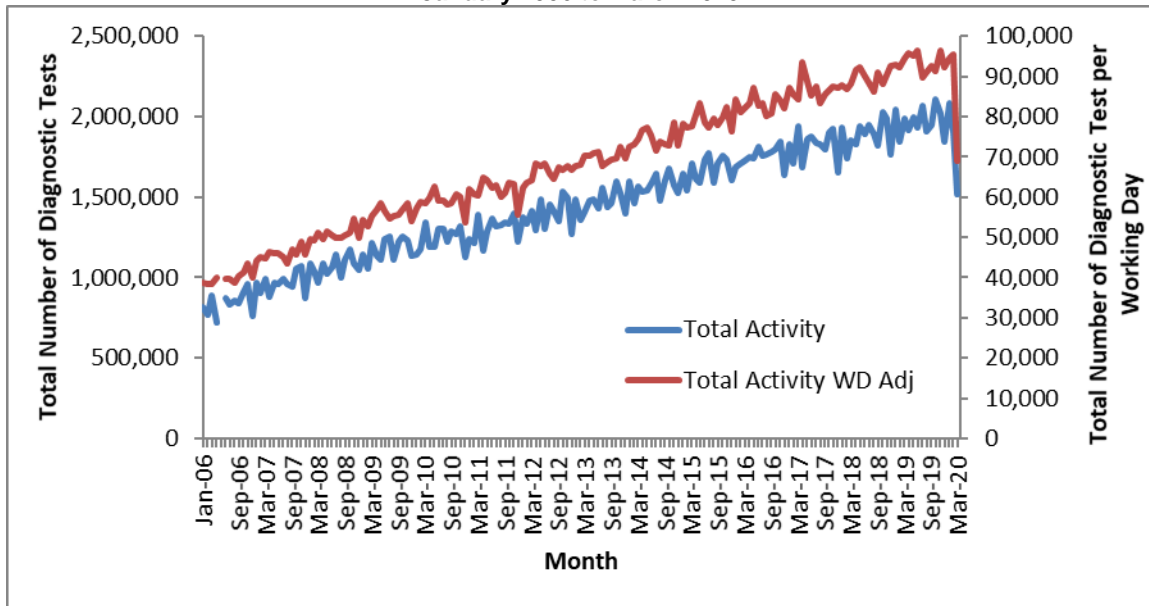
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to March 2020



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 decreased over the last 12 months. The average monthly decrease in activity was 2.2%, however this is due to a sharp drop in activity in March as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests January 2006 to March 2020



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 1.5%. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Electrophysiology, where the average monthly decrease was 10.3% (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – March 2019 and March 2020

	Mar-19	Mar-20	Average monthly growth
MRI	315,521	256,361	-1.7%
CT	526,306	436,903	-1.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	654,781	486,588	-2.4%
Barium Enema	1,906	2,271	1.5%
Dexa Scan	37,889	26,145	-3.0%
Audiology Assessments	104,933	68,352	-3.5%
Echocardiography	138,281	101,243	-2.6%
Electrophysiology	2,637	712	-10.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,485	13,291	-3.1%
Sleep Studies	10,746	7,133	-3.4%
Urodynamics	6,956	4,980	-2.7%
Colonoscopy	48,687	35,851	-2.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	28,621	18,809	-3.4%
Cystoscopy	27,246	19,502	-2.7%
Gastroscopy	62,335	42,599	-3.1%
All Tests	1,986,330	1,520,740	-2.2%

4 March 2020 Data

This section analyses the March 2020 diagnostic waiting times and activity data, and includes comparisons between tests, area teams, providers and commissioners.

6+ week waits performance in March was significantly worse than in preceding months, due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of March 2020, there were a total of 85,400 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 10.2% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with March 2019, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 59,000, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 7.7 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with March 2019, the tests with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more were Flexi Sigmoidoscopy and Peripheral Neurophysiology, both of which increased by 14.4 percentage points. The test with the smallest increase was Electrophysiology which increased by 2.3 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2019 and March 2020

	Mar-19	Mar-20	Difference (%age points)
MRI	2.0%	9.7%	7.7
CT	1.9%	7.6%	5.7
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	0.7%	6.3%	5.7
Barium Enema	1.0%	5.2%	4.2
Dexa Scan	1.1%	8.6%	7.6
Audiology Assessments	1.3%	8.0%	6.7
Echocardiography	6.0%	11.5%	5.5
Electrophysiology	1.4%	3.7%	2.3
Peripheral Neurophysiology	2.7%	17.1%	14.4
Sleep Studies	4.6%	15.8%	11.1
Urodynamics	15.3%	25.3%	10.1
Colonoscopy	9.5%	20.9%	11.4
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	6.4%	20.9%	14.4
Cystoscopy	8.2%	17.1%	9.0
Gastroscopy	6.1%	19.0%	13.0
All Tests	2.5%	10.2%	7.7

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with March 2019, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with an

increase of 12.2 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 7.6 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 6.4 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

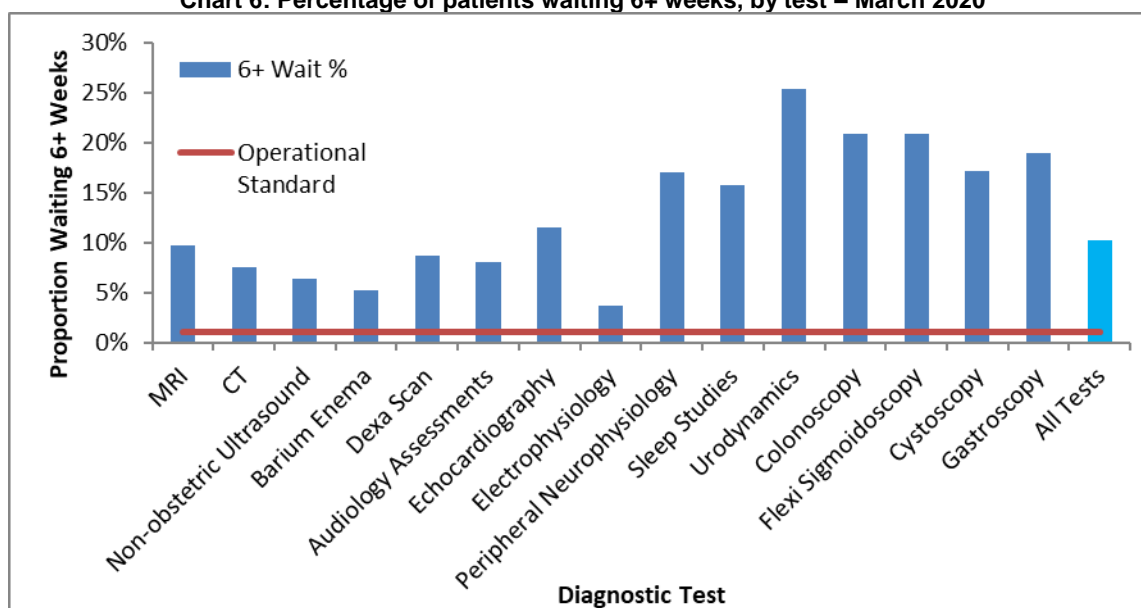
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – March 2019 and March 2020

	Mar-19	Mar-20	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	1.3%	7.6%	6.4
Physiological Measurement	4.5%	12.0%	7.6
Endoscopy	7.5%	19.8%	12.2
Total	2.5%	10.2%	7.7

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 none of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology (3.7%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Urodynamics (25.3%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2020



- 4.1.6. 133 of the 145 acute trusts that submitted data for March 2020 failed to meet the 1% operational standard. Two acute Trusts did not submit data this month.

- 4.1.7. All 192 of the 192 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard. This is 56 more than the number of Commissioners that failed the standard in the previous month, and 71 more than in March 2019².

¹ Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

² 196 Commissioners in March 2019

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 more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 8.3% and 12.4% (Table 4).

Table 4: March 2020 Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity by Regional Team*

Region	Number of patients waiting six weeks or more at month end	Percentage of patients waiting six weeks or more at month end	Total number of patients waiting at month end	Total activity undertaken in month	Median waiting time
London	18,311	12.4%	147,729	228,486	3.4
South West	10,427	12.0%	86,672	151,932	3.1
South East	9,113	8.3%	109,729	213,285	3.0
Midlands	12,716	8.7%	146,409	278,568	3.0
East of England	8,647	9.3%	93,352	163,842	3.0
North West	10,165	8.6%	118,023	213,990	2.9
North East and Yorkshire	15,765	11.9%	132,867	258,250	3.1
England	85,446	10.2%	838,569	1,520,740	3.1

*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 March 2020 there were a total of 838,600 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is a decrease of 233,200 (21.8%) from March 2019.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 32.4% of the total waiting list, or 271,300 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.07% of the total waiting list, or 600 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – March 2019 and March 2020

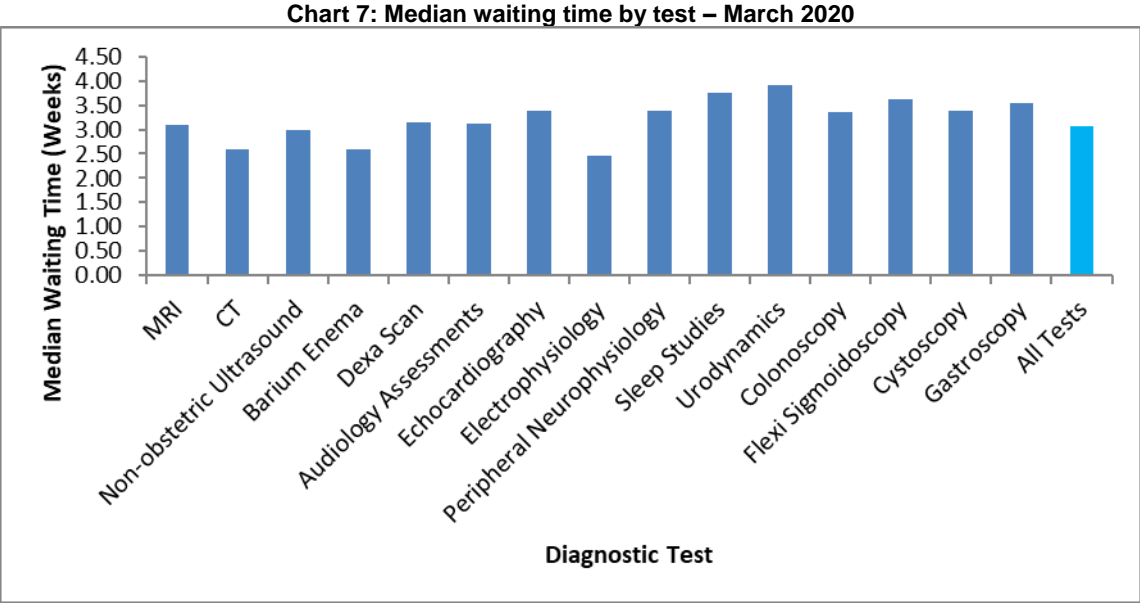
	Mar-19	Mar-20	Growth (%age)
MRI	213,049	160,769	-24.5%
CT	137,061	115,602	-15.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	398,911	271,316	-32.0%
Barium Enema	1,627	1,196	-26.5%
Dexa Scan	33,231	26,366	-20.7%
Audiology Assessments	46,848	33,990	-27.4%
Echocardiography	82,929	71,643	-13.6%
Electrophysiology	1,056	590	-44.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,165	16,712	-17.1%
Sleep Studies	9,512	7,933	-16.6%
Urodynamics	5,521	4,912	-11.0%
Colonoscopy	40,822	44,561	9.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,866	20,261	7.4%
Cystoscopy	15,760	14,570	-7.6%
Gastroscopy	46,386	48,148	3.8%
All Tests	1,071,744	838,569	-21.8%

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

- 4.2.3. There have been large falls in the number of patients waiting for most tests. The largest decrease has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list decreased by 44.1% compared to March 2019. The largest increase in patients waiting was for Colonoscopy, where the waiting list grew by 9.2% compared with March 2019.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of March 2020, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.1 weeks from the time of referral. This is an increase of 1.0 compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Electrophysiology at 2.5 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 3.9 weeks (Chart 7).



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 1,520,700 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during March 2020. This is a decrease of 465,600 (23.4%) from March 2019 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 486,600 tests taking place. This accounted for 32.0% of all activity in March 2020. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 700 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.05% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 1.1% from the same period last year (an increase of 0.7% when adjusted for working days).

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – March 2019 and March 2020

	Mar-20	Mar-19	YTD 19/20	YTD 18/19	Growth Mar 20 vs Mar 19	Growth YTD 19/20 vs YTD 18/19	Adjusted Growth Mar 20 vs Mar 19	Adjusted Growth YTD 19/20 vs YTD 18/19
MRI	256,361	315,521	3,651,772	3,628,591	-18.7%	0.6%	-22.4%	0.2%
CT	436,903	526,306	6,274,382	6,084,105	-17.0%	3.1%	-20.8%	2.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	486,588	654,781	7,643,244	7,609,876	-25.7%	0.4%	-29.1%	0.0%
Barium Enema	2,271	1,906	35,839	23,531	19.2%	52.3%	13.7%	51.7%
Dexa Scan	26,145	37,889	467,281	454,856	-31.0%	2.7%	-34.1%	2.3%
Audiology Assessments	68,352	104,933	1,249,331	1,263,067	-34.9%	-1.1%	-37.8%	-1.5%
Echocardiography	101,243	138,281	1,618,560	1,585,028	-26.8%	2.1%	-30.1%	1.7%
Electrophysiology	712	2,637	21,271	33,908	-73.0%	-37.3%	-74.2%	-37.5%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	13,291	19,485	230,004	227,665	-31.8%	1.0%	-34.9%	0.6%
Sleep Studies	7,133	10,746	126,964	130,883	-33.6%	-3.0%	-36.6%	-3.4%
Urodynamics	4,980	6,956	79,789	81,894	-28.4%	-2.6%	-31.7%	-3.0%
Colonoscopy	35,851	48,687	547,679	531,674	-26.4%	3.0%	-29.7%	2.6%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,809	28,621	312,125	317,867	-34.3%	-1.8%	-37.3%	-2.2%
Cystoscopy	19,502	27,246	298,940	309,271	-28.4%	-3.3%	-31.7%	-3.7%
Gastroscopy	42,599	62,335	683,163	696,462	-31.7%	-1.9%	-34.8%	-2.3%
All Tests	1,520,740	1,986,330	23,240,344	22,978,678	-23.4%	1.1%	-26.9%	0.7%

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 Revisions

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 2020 for the months July 2019 through to December 2019.

5.3 Data Availability

5.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. [A full calendar of all statistical publications 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

Between 8 February 2018 and 5 April 2018, NHS England and NHS Improvement consulted on the future of the Quarterly Diagnostics Census and Monthly Diagnostics Waiting Times and Activity Returns. The outcome document for the consultation was published 30 October 2019 and confirmed the decision to stop collecting the Quarterly Diagnostics Census on a permanent basis and to continue the monthly diagnostics waiting times and activity return (DM01) in its current form. Find out more at: <https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/consultation/diagnostics-census-waiting-times-activity-return>

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:

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