

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

April 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 April 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 April 2020 was 468,600. This was 55.7% 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 April 2019 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 430,900, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 52.2 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 55.7% (April 2020).
- At the end of April 2020, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology with 22.8%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 68.9% 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 6.5 weeks at the end of April 2020.
- There were 840,700 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of April 2020. This is a decrease of 213,800 from April 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 612,600 diagnostic tests were undertaken in April 2020. This is a decrease of 1,304,667 from April 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)

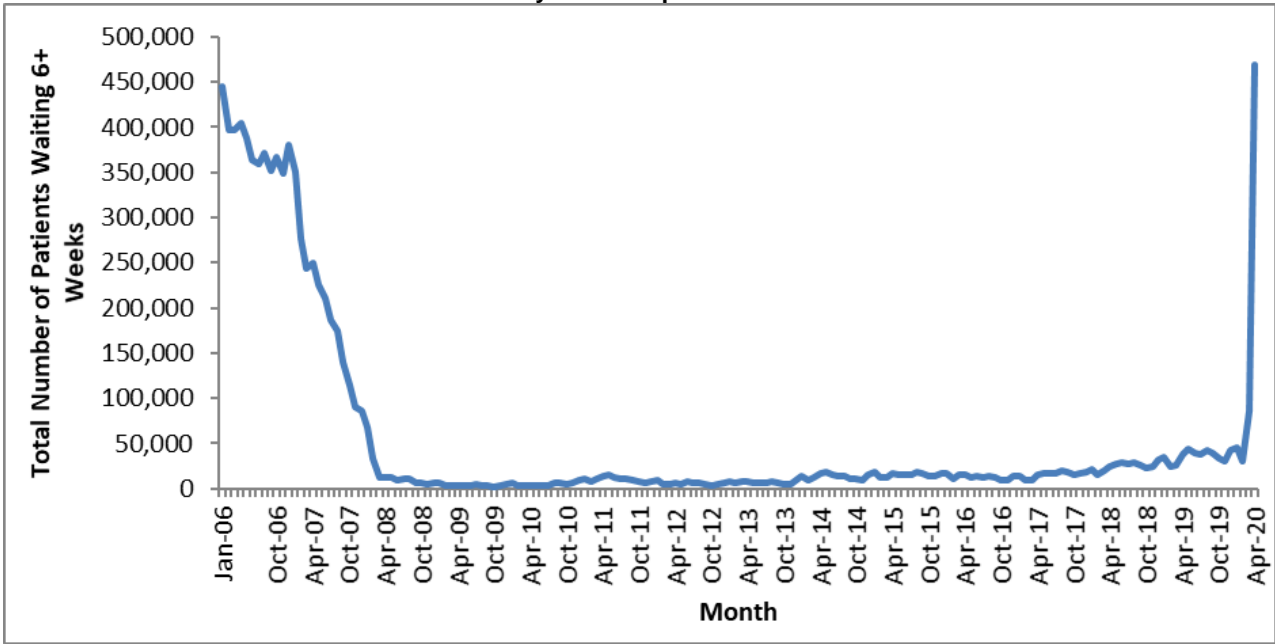
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

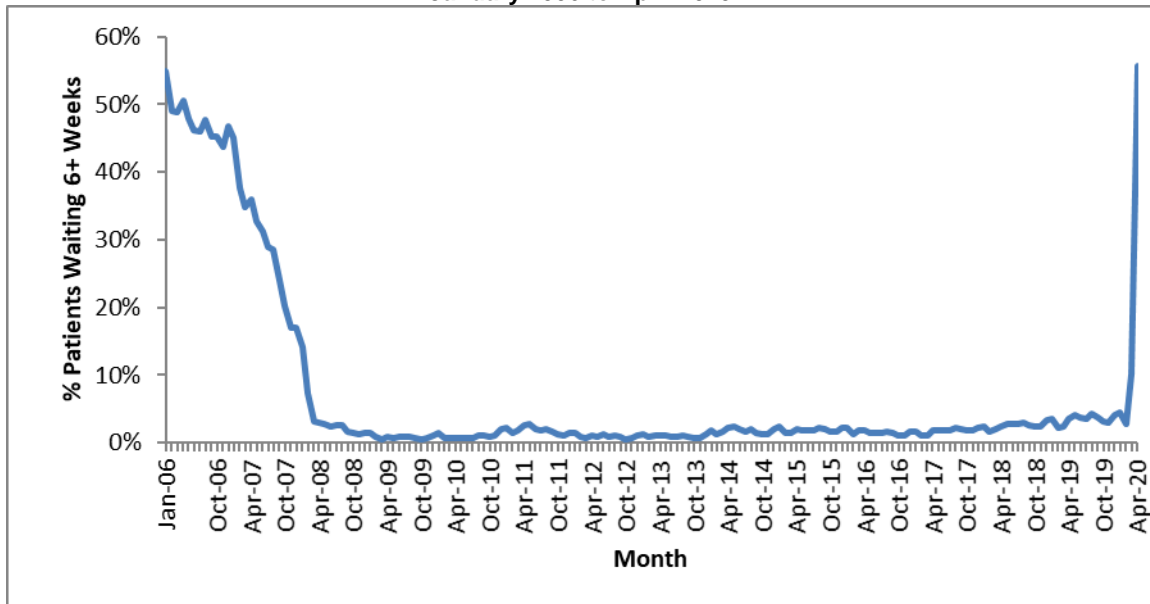
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait 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 April 2020 there was an increase of 383,200 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 April 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 55.7% (April 2020). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

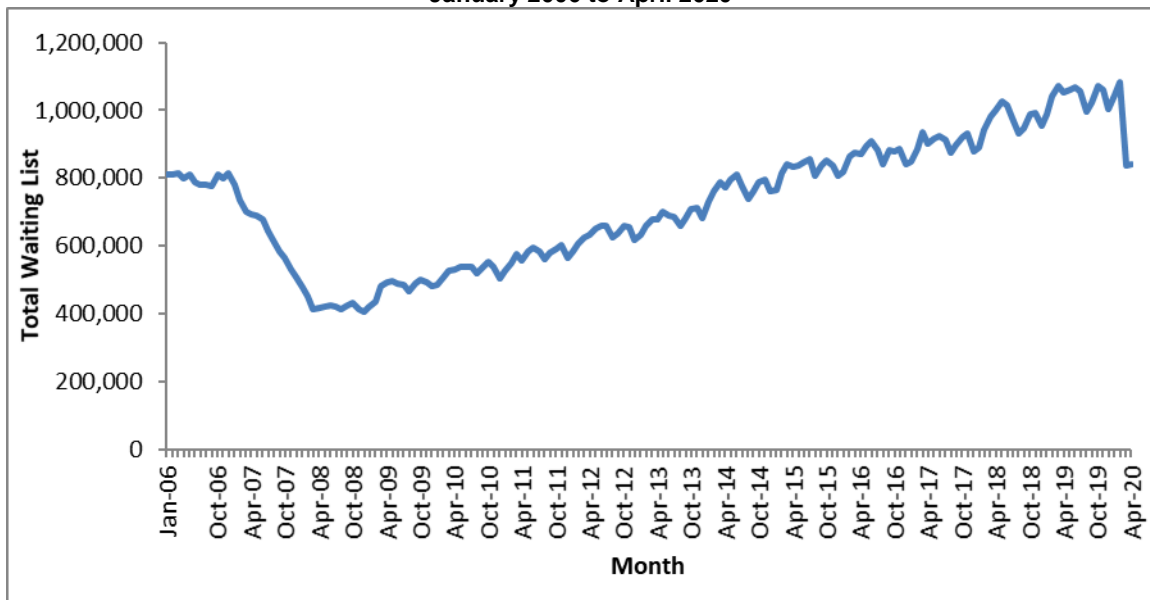
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to April 2020**



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 crisis.

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

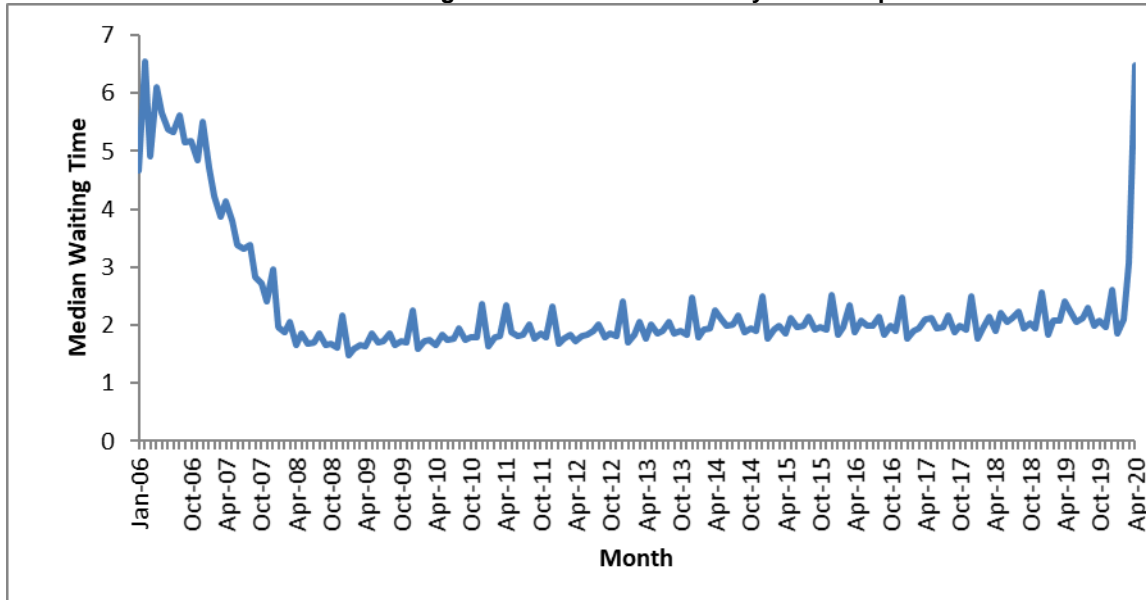


3.3 Median Waiting Time

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 relatively stable at around 2.2 weeks, with a high of 6.5 weeks (April 2020) and a low of 1.9 weeks (January 2020).

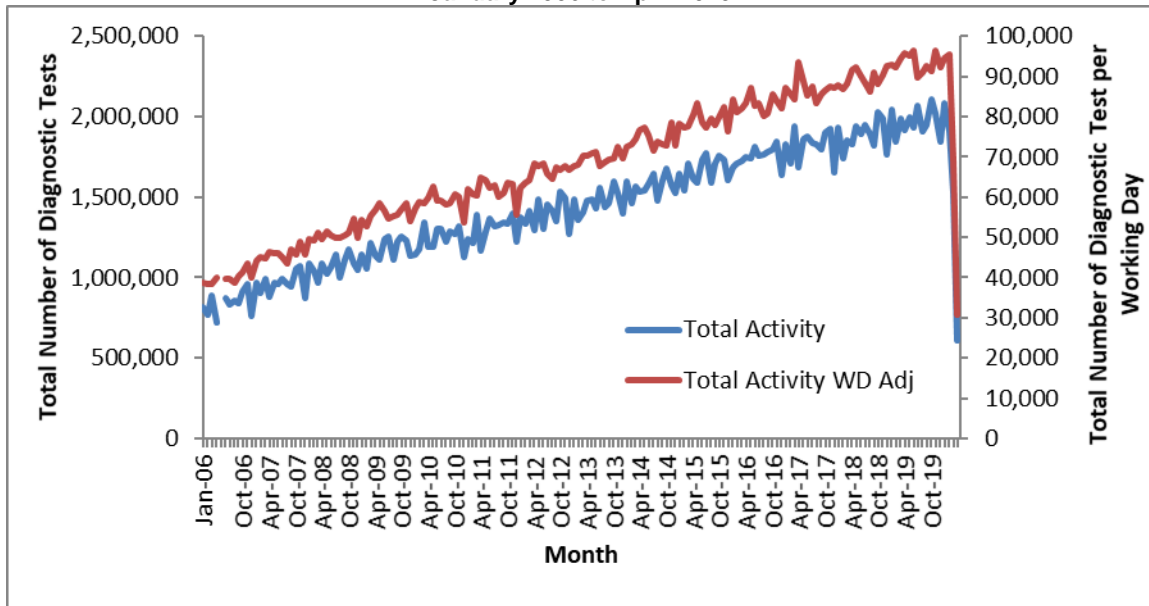
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to April 2020



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 9.1%, however this is due to sharp drops in activity in March and April 2020 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 April 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 smallest decrease in activity was CT, where the average monthly decrease was 4.8%. The test with the largest reduction in activity was DEXA Scan, where the average monthly decrease was 25.5% (Table 1).

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

	Apr-19	Apr-20	Average monthly growth
MRI	298,879	91,168	-9.4%
CT	508,927	281,382	-4.8%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	639,014	162,541	-10.8%
Barium Enema	2,905	860	-9.6%
Dexa Scan	38,737	1,125	-25.5%
Audiology Assessments	105,114	17,894	-13.7%
Echocardiography	134,086	35,826	-10.4%
Electrophysiology	2,341	158	-20.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18,980	1,378	-19.6%
Sleep Studies	10,415	1,632	-14.3%
Urodynamics	6,453	788	-16.1%
Colonoscopy	43,399	3,480	-19.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	25,922	1,686	-20.4%
Cystoscopy	25,227	6,856	-10.3%
Gastroscopy	56,909	5,867	-17.2%
All Tests	1,917,308	612,641	-9.1%

4 April 2020 Data

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

6+ week waits performance in April 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 April 2020, there were a total of 468,600 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 55.7% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with April 2019, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 430,900, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 52.2 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with April 2019, the tests with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Peripheral Neurophysiology, which increased by 62.2 percentage points. The test with the smallest increase was Electrophysiology which increased by 21.8 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Apr-19	Apr-20	Difference (%age points)
MRI	3.3%	55.1%	51.8
CT	2.7%	43.4%	40.8
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	1.7%	54.8%	53.1
Barium Enema	1.4%	50.6%	49.2
Dexa Scan	1.2%	60.6%	59.5
Audiology Assessments	1.8%	61.6%	59.8
Echocardiography	7.3%	57.9%	50.6
Electrophysiology	1.0%	22.8%	21.8
Peripheral Neurophysiology	5.1%	67.3%	62.2
Sleep Studies	6.2%	66.8%	60.6
Urodynamics	17.9%	68.9%	51.0
Colonoscopy	10.6%	59.8%	49.2
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	7.3%	62.2%	54.8
Cystoscopy	9.1%	53.1%	44.0
Gastroscopy	7.3%	63.5%	56.2
All Tests	3.6%	55.7%	52.2

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

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

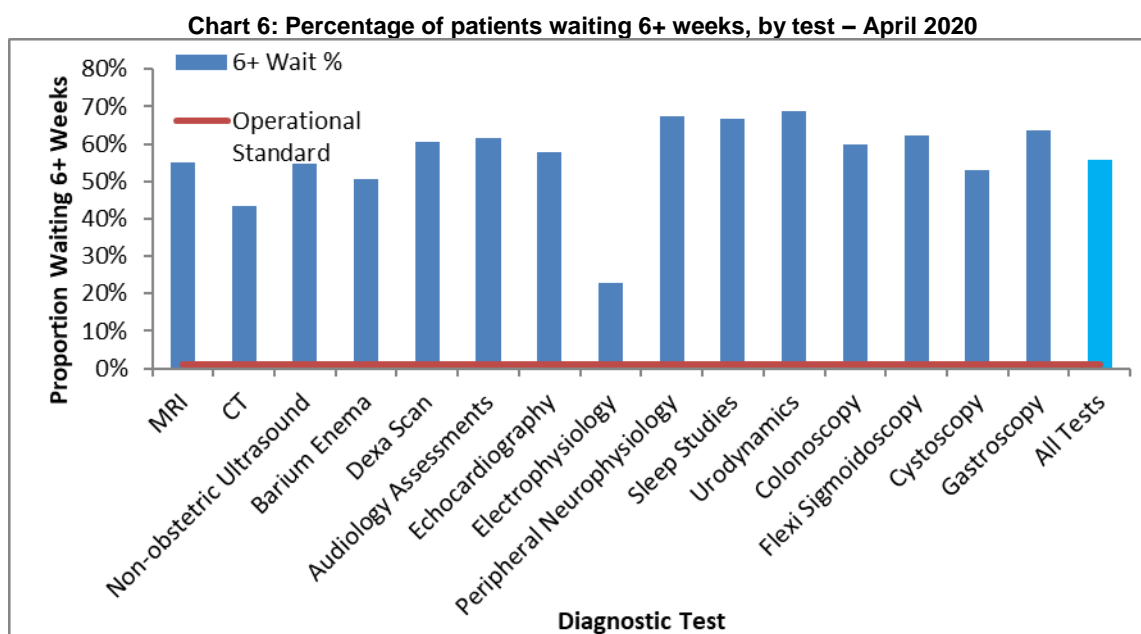
Measurement with an increase of 55.0 percentage points. Endoscopy increased by 52.2 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 50.5 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

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

	Apr-19	Apr-20	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	2.3%	52.8%	50.5
Physiological Measurement	5.8%	60.8%	55.0
Endoscopy	8.6%	60.9%	52.2
Total	3.6%	55.7%	52.2

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 (22.8%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Urodynamics (68.9%) (Chart 6).



- 4.1.6. 139 of the 145 acute trusts that submitted data for April 2020 failed to meet the 1% operational standard. One acute Trust did not submit data this month.
- 4.1.7. All 136 of the 136 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 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

¹ Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 46.9% and 62.3% (Table 4).

Table 4: April 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	85,248	57.8%	147,597	87,123	6.8
South West	45,190	55.2%	81,885	69,401	6.4
South East	50,540	46.9%	107,680	95,692	5.7
Midlands	81,298	54.9%	147,968	120,932	6.4
East of England	56,344	56.6%	99,621	61,465	6.5
North West	67,834	54.8%	123,876	76,539	6.4
North East and Yorkshire	81,410	62.3%	130,578	97,310	7.0
England	468,622	55.7%	840,742	612,641	6.5

*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 April 2020 there were a total of 840,700 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is a decrease of 213,800 (20.3%) from April 2019.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 29.3% of the total waiting list, or 246,100 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.04% of the total waiting list, or 400 patients (Table 5).

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

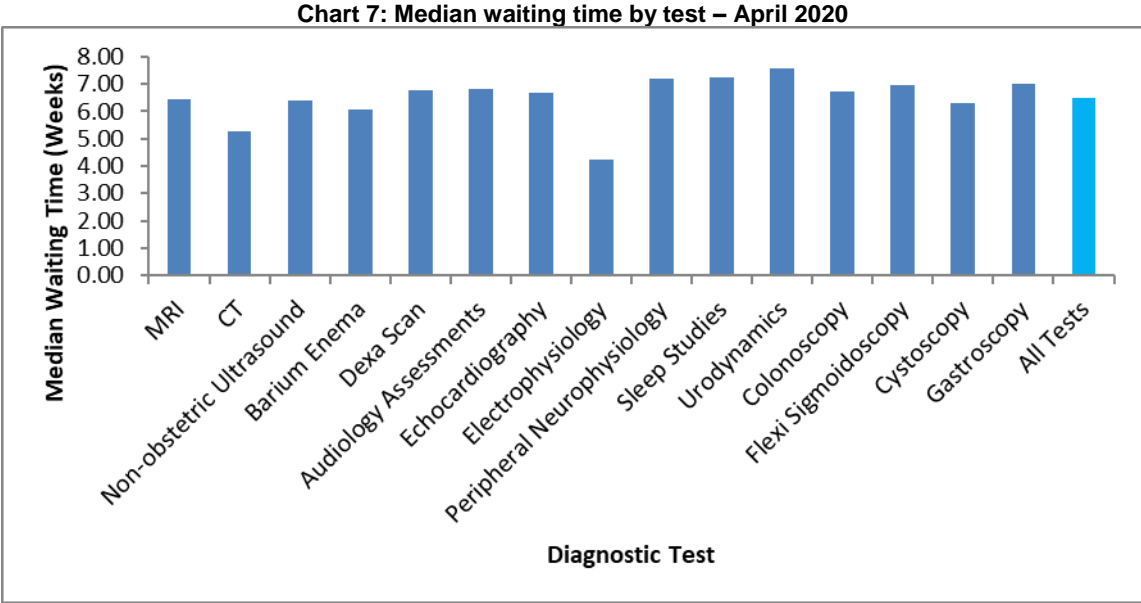
	Apr-19	Apr-20	Growth (%age)
MRI	206,980	143,175	-30.8%
CT	134,628	112,490	-16.4%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	387,353	246,100	-36.5%
Barium Enema	1,496	1,508	0.8%
Dexa Scan	32,001	29,530	-7.7%
Audiology Assessments	44,674	41,281	-7.6%
Echocardiography	86,438	82,854	-4.1%
Electrophysiology	1,052	377	-64.2%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,855	19,530	-6.4%
Sleep Studies	9,700	8,240	-15.1%
Urodynamics	5,706	5,068	-11.2%
Colonoscopy	41,737	54,258	30.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	19,615	24,061	22.7%
Cystoscopy	15,443	15,426	-0.1%
Gastroscopy	46,849	56,844	21.3%
All Tests	1,054,527	840,742	-20.3%

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 64.2% compared to April 2019. The largest increase in patients waiting was for Colonoscopy, where the waiting list grew by 30% compared with April 2019.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of April 2020, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 6.5 weeks from the time of referral. This is an increase of 3.4 compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Electrophysiology at 4.2 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 7.6 weeks (Chart 7).



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 612,600 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during April 2020. This is a decrease of 1,304,667 (68.0%) from April 2019 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was CT with 281,400 tests taking place. This accounted for 45.9% of all activity in April 2020. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 200 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.03% of all activity this month.
- 4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has decreased by 4.9% from the same period last year (a decrease of 5.3% when adjusted for working days).

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

	Apr-20	Apr-19	YTD 20/21	YTD 19/20	Growth Apr 20 vs Apr 19	Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20	Adjusted Growth Apr 20 vs Apr 19	Adjusted Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20
MRI	91,168	298,879	91,168	298,879	-69.5%	-69.5%	-69.5%	-69.5%
CT	281,382	508,927	281,382	508,927	-44.7%	-44.7%	-44.7%	-44.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	162,541	639,014	162,541	639,014	-74.6%	-74.6%	-74.6%	-74.6%
Barium Enema	860	2,905	860	2,905	-70.4%	-70.4%	-70.4%	-70.4%
Dexa Scan	1,125	38,737	1,125	38,737	-97.1%	-97.1%	-97.1%	-97.1%
Audiology Assessments	17,894	105,114	17,894	105,114	-83.0%	-83.0%	-83.0%	-83.0%
Echocardiography	35,826	134,086	35,826	134,086	-73.3%	-73.3%	-73.3%	-73.3%
Electrophysiology	158	2,341	158	2,341	-93.3%	-93.3%	-93.3%	-93.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	1,378	18,980	1,378	18,980	-92.7%	-92.7%	-92.7%	-92.7%
Sleep Studies	1,632	10,415	1,632	10,415	-84.3%	-84.3%	-84.3%	-84.3%
Urodynamics	788	6,453	788	6,453	-87.8%	-87.8%	-87.8%	-87.8%
Colonoscopy	3,480	43,399	3,480	43,399	-92.0%	-92.0%	-92.0%	-92.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	1,686	25,922	1,686	25,922	-93.5%	-93.5%	-93.5%	-93.5%
Cystoscopy	6,856	25,227	6,856	25,227	-72.8%	-72.8%	-72.8%	-72.8%
Gastroscopy	5,867	56,909	5,867	56,909	-89.7%	-89.7%	-89.7%	-89.7%
All Tests	612,641	1,917,308	612,641	1,917,308	-68.0%	-68.0%	-68.0%	-68.0%

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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