

# NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



# **NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data**

## **May 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 May 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 May 2020 was 571,500. This was 58.5% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or more was not met this month.
- Compared with May 2019 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 528,200, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 54.4 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 58.5% (May 2020).
- At the end of May 2020, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Computed Tomography with 44.6%. The test with the highest proportion was Audiology Assessments, with 80.1% 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 8.6 weeks at the end of May 2020.
- There were 977,500 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of May 2020. This is a decrease of 82,399 from May 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 873,900 diagnostic tests were undertaken in May 2020. This is a decrease of 1,122,512 from May 2019. Monthly activity has increased slightly over the majority of last 12 months, before falling sharply in March 2020. We have started to see activity increase as services resume from that point onwards.
- The following organisations did not submit Diagnostics (DM01) data this month:
  - North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust (RGN)

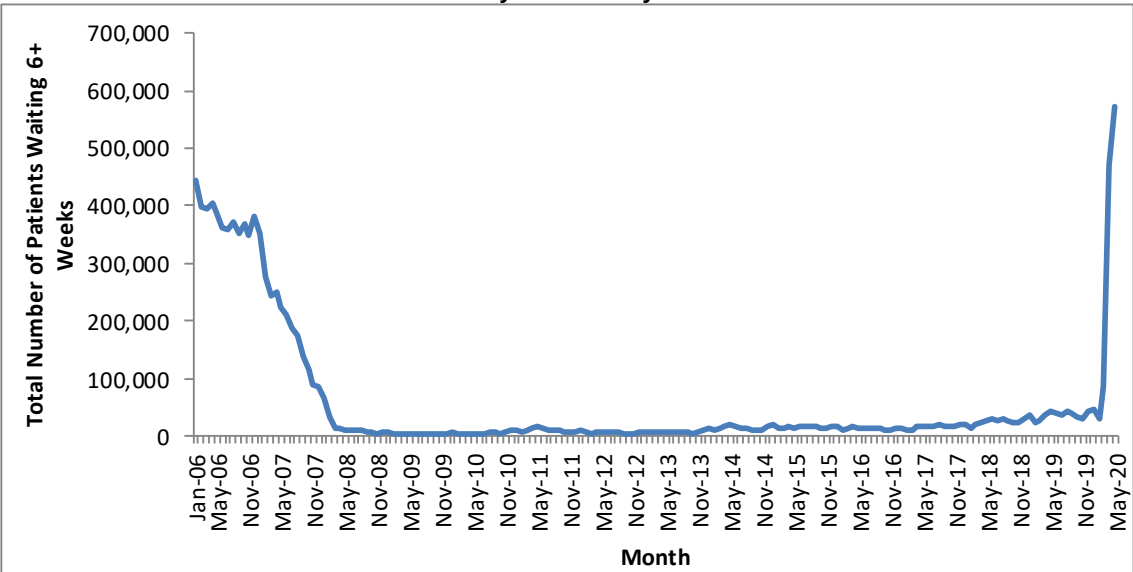
### 3 National Trends

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

#### 3.1 6+ Week Waits

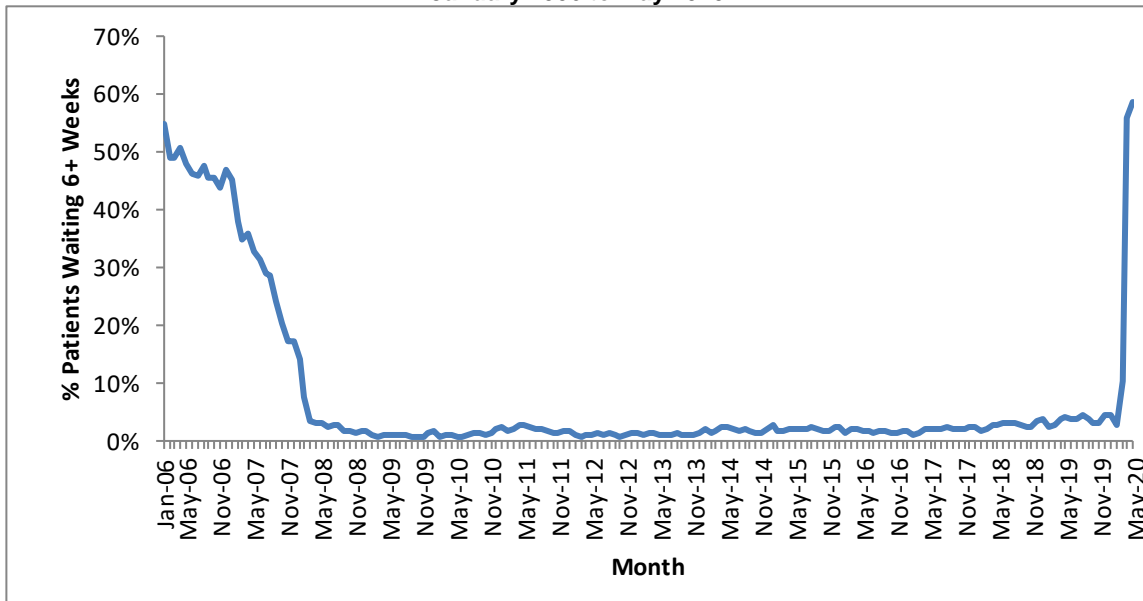
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 and has remained broadly stable since (Chart 1). This reduction is most likely the result of Trusts working towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait 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 before rising sharply in April 2020. In May 2020 there was an increase of 102,800 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 May 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 58.5% (May 2020). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

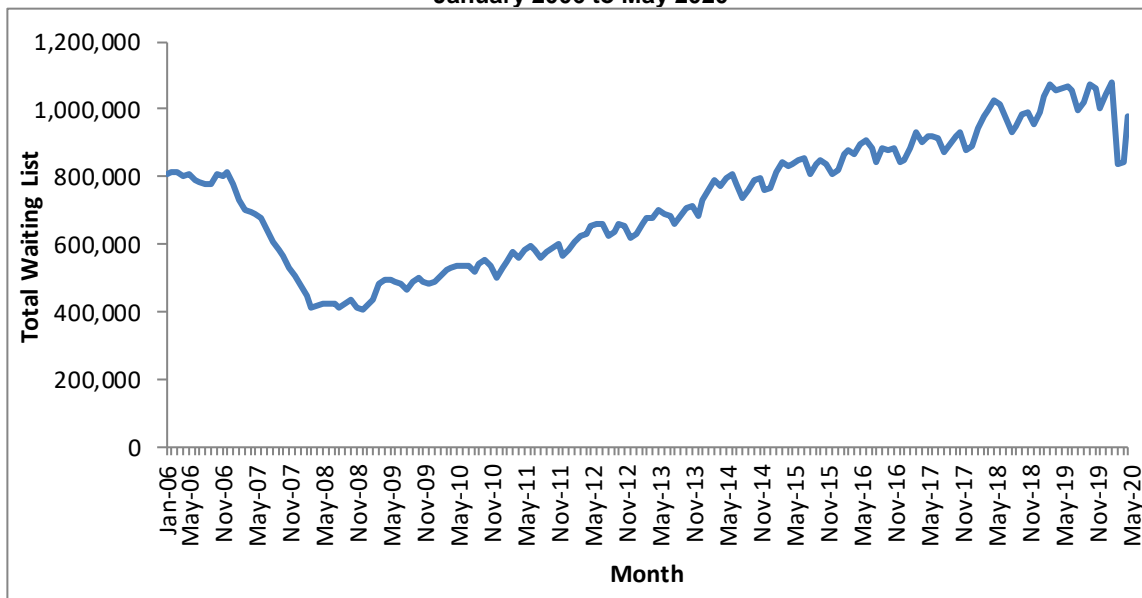
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests  
January 2006 to May 2020**



### 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 May 2020**



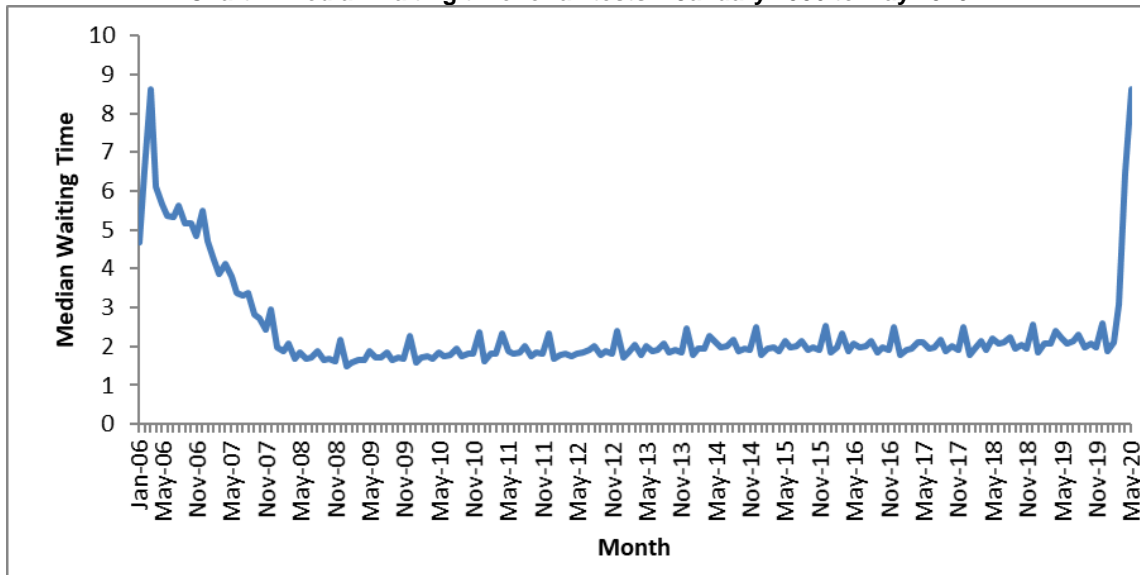
### 3.3 Median Waiting Time

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 8.6 weeks (May 2020) and a low of 1.9 weeks (January 2020).

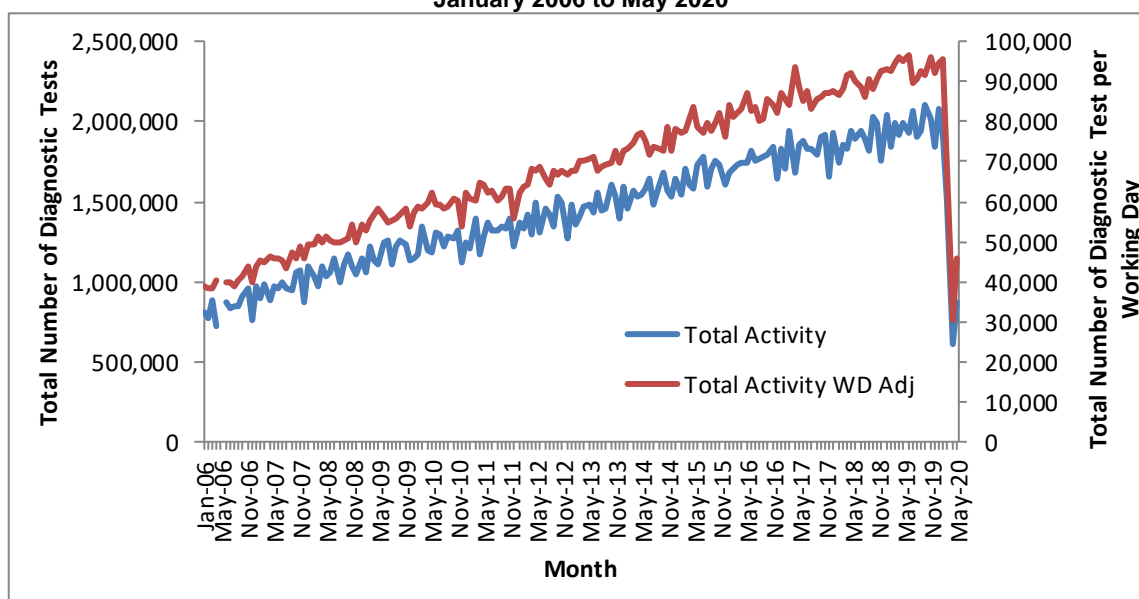
**Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to May 2020**



### 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 6.7%, however this is due to sharp drops in activity in March, April and May 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 May 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 2.7%. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Dexa Scan, where the average monthly decrease was 18.6% (Table 1).

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

	May-19	May-20	Average monthly growth
MRI	308,536	136,677	-6.6%
CT	530,559	382,296	-2.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	668,207	243,769	-8.1%
Barium Enema	3,156	1,483	-6.1%
Dexa Scan	40,340	3,426	-18.6%
Audiology Assessments	107,573	18,113	-13.8%
Echocardiography	140,149	52,076	-7.9%
Electrophysiology	2,468	212	-18.5%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,950	3,197	-14.2%
Sleep Studies	10,631	2,097	-12.7%
Urodynamics	7,006	927	-15.5%
Colonoscopy	45,919	7,332	-14.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	26,706	3,564	-15.5%
Cystoscopy	25,747	9,292	-8.1%
Gastroscopy	59,418	9,392	-14.2%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,996,365</b>	<b>873,853</b>	<b>-6.7%</b>

## 4 May 2020 Data

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

6+ week waits performance in May 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 May 2020, there were a total of 571,500 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 58.5% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with May 2019, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 528,200, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 54.4 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with May 2019, the tests with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Audiology Assessments, which increased by 77.9 percentage points. The test with the smallest increase was CT which increased by 41.4 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	May-19	May-20	Difference (%age points)
MRI	3.5%	54.3%	50.8
CT	3.3%	44.6%	41.4
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	2.3%	54.5%	52.2
Barium Enema	1.6%	50.1%	48.4
Dexa Scan	1.1%	67.7%	66.6
Audiology Assessments	2.2%	80.1%	77.9
Echocardiography	8.9%	61.6%	52.6
Electrophysiology	0.5%	51.1%	50.6
Peripheral Neurophysiology	4.9%	72.7%	67.8
Sleep Studies	5.4%	71.7%	66.2
Urodynamics	17.7%	72.0%	54.3
Colonoscopy	10.5%	66.5%	56.1
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	7.7%	67.4%	59.7
Cystoscopy	9.6%	55.8%	46.2
Gastroscopy	7.6%	68.8%	61.1
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>58.5%</b>	<b>54.4</b>

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

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

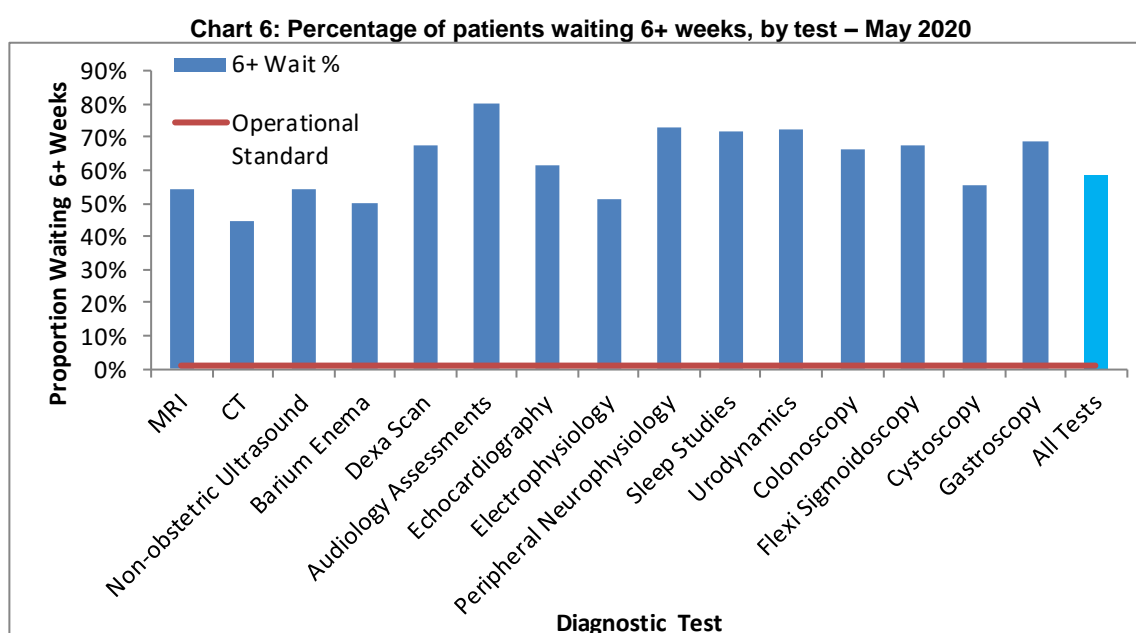
Measurement with an increase of 68.7 percentage points. Endoscopy increased by 66.4 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 53.1 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

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

	May-19	May-20	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	2.7%	53.1%	50.4
Physiological Measurement	6.7%	68.7%	62.0
Endoscopy	8.8%	66.4%	57.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>58.5%</b>	<b>54.4</b>

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 CT (44.6%). The test with the highest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Audiology Assessments (80.1%) (Chart 6).



- 4.1.6. 140 of the 142 acute trusts that submitted data for May 2020 failed to meet the 1% operational standard. One acute Trust did not submit data this month.
- 4.1.7. All 135 of the 135 Commissioners<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 52.0% and 63.7% (Table 4).

**Table 4: May 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	95,604	58.9%	162,334	120,359	9.0
South West	54,393	59.1%	92,082	100,461	8.6
South East	66,001	52.0%	126,872	143,867	6.7
Midlands	107,178	56.4%	190,150	161,370	8.2
East of England	69,052	59.3%	116,505	92,958	8.8
North West	88,476	60.3%	146,831	106,994	8.5
North East and Yorkshire	89,758	63.7%	140,843	142,131	9.9
<b>England</b>	<b>571,459</b>	<b>58.5%</b>	<b>977,491</b>	<b>873,853</b>	<b>8.6</b>

\*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 2020 there were a total of 977,500 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is a decrease of 82,300 (7.8%) from May 2019.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 29.4% of the total waiting list, or 287,800 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.11% of the total waiting list, or 1,100 patients (Table 5).

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

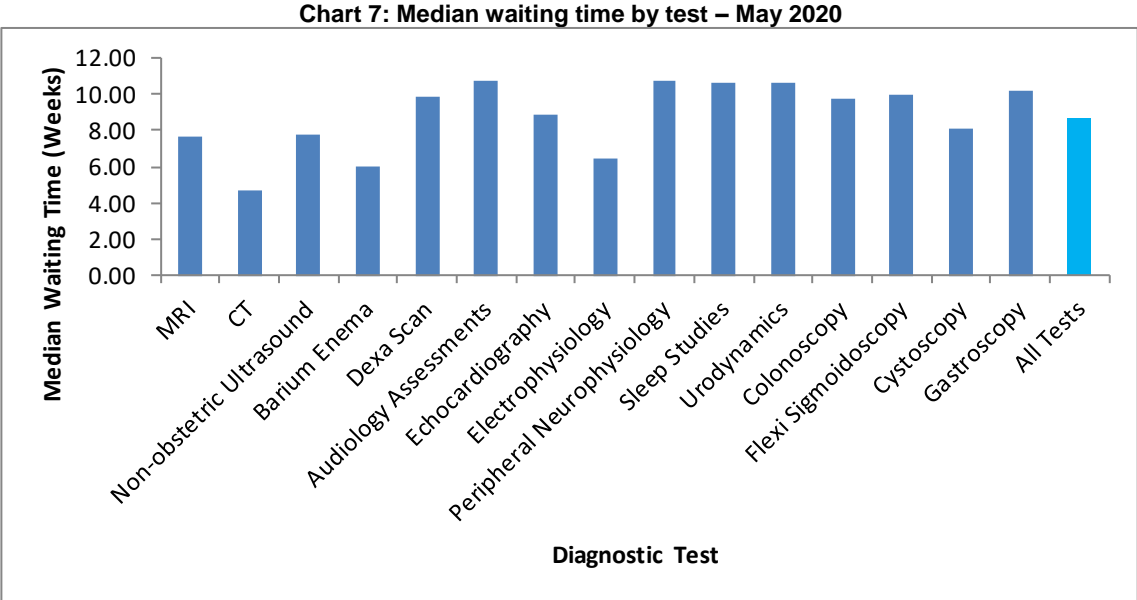
	May-19	May-20	Growth (%age)
MRI	208,181	159,614	<b>-23.3%</b>
CT	138,188	129,520	<b>-6.3%</b>
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	386,281	287,843	<b>-25.5%</b>
Barium Enema	1,604	1,814	<b>13.1%</b>
Dexa Scan	31,976	36,041	<b>12.7%</b>
Audiology Assessments	44,037	46,121	<b>4.7%</b>
Echocardiography	87,638	92,967	<b>6.1%</b>
Electrophysiology	1,131	1,076	<b>-4.9%</b>
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,657	25,486	<b>23.4%</b>
Sleep Studies	9,847	10,294	<b>4.5%</b>
Urodynamics	5,130	6,057	<b>18.1%</b>
Colonoscopy	42,878	64,955	<b>51.5%</b>
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	19,772	28,883	<b>46.1%</b>
Cystoscopy	15,158	18,673	<b>23.2%</b>
Gastroscopy	47,352	68,147	<b>43.9%</b>
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,059,830</b>	<b>977,491</b>	<b>-7.8%</b>

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. The largest decrease in the number of patients waiting, by test has been for Non-obstetric Ultrasound, where the waiting list decreased by 25.5% compared to May 2019. The largest increase in patients waiting was for Colonoscopy, where the waiting list grew by 51.5% compared with May 2019.

### 4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of May 2020, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 8.6 weeks from the time of referral. This is an increase of 2.1 compared to the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was CT at 4.7 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Peripheral Neurophysiology at 10.7 weeks (Chart 7).



### 4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 873,900 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during May 2020. This is a decrease of 1,122,512 (51.6%) from May 2019 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was CT with 382,300 tests taking place. This accounted for 43.7% of all activity in May 2020. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 200 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.02% of all activity this month.
- 4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has decreased by 10.0% from the same period last year (a decrease of 9.6% when adjusted for working days).

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

	May-20	May-19	YTD 20/21	YTD 19/20	Growth May 20 vs May 19	Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20	Adjusted Growth May 20 vs May 19	Adjusted Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20
MRI	136,677	308,536	227,595	607,415	-55.7%	-62.5%	-51.0%	-60.6%
CT	382,296	530,559	663,605	1,039,486	-27.9%	-36.2%	-20.4%	-32.9%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	243,769	668,207	406,215	1,307,221	-63.5%	-68.9%	-59.7%	-67.3%
Barium Enema	1,483	3,156	2,343	6,061	-53.0%	-61.3%	-48.1%	-59.4%
Dexa Scan	3,426	40,340	4,551	79,077	-91.5%	-94.2%	-90.6%	-93.9%
Audiology Assessments	18,113	107,573	36,007	212,687	-83.2%	-83.1%	-81.4%	-82.2%
Echocardiography	52,076	140,149	87,902	274,235	-62.8%	-67.9%	-58.9%	-66.3%
Electrophysiology	212	2,468	370	4,809	-91.4%	-92.3%	-90.5%	-91.9%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	3,197	19,950	4,575	38,930	-84.0%	-88.2%	-82.3%	-87.6%
Sleep Studies	2,097	10,631	3,729	21,046	-80.3%	-82.3%	-78.2%	-81.4%
Urodynamics	927	7,006	1,715	13,459	-86.8%	-87.3%	-85.4%	-86.6%
Colonoscopy	7,332	45,919	10,816	89,318	-84.0%	-87.9%	-82.4%	-87.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	3,564	26,706	5,252	52,628	-86.7%	-90.0%	-85.2%	-89.5%
Cystoscopy	9,292	25,747	16,151	50,974	-63.9%	-68.3%	-60.1%	-66.7%
Gastroscopy	9,392	59,418	15,259	116,327	-84.2%	-86.9%	-82.5%	-86.2%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>873,853</b>	<b>1,996,365</b>	<b>1,486,085</b>	<b>3,913,673</b>	<b>-56.2%</b>	<b>-62.0%</b>	<b>-51.6%</b>	<b>-60.1%</b>

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](mailto: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](mailto:nhsengland.media@nhs.net)

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

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Performance Analysis Team (Central), NHS England and NHS Improvement  
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Email: [england.nhsdata@nhs.net](mailto:england.nhsdata@nhs.net)