

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

September 2020 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 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 documentation](#).

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 September 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 September 2020 was 420,400. This was 33.0% 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 September 2019 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 381,700, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 29.3 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 September 2020, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology with 9.1%. The test with the highest proportion was Gastroscopy, with 58.9% 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 3.4 weeks at the end of September 2020.
- There were 1,272,300 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of September 2020. This is an increase of 249,300 from September 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 before increasing again.
- A total of 1,711,100 diagnostic tests were undertaken in September 2020. This is a decrease of 233,900 from September 2019. Monthly activity was increasing slightly over the last 12 months until it fell sharply from March 2020. We have started to see activity increase as services resume from May 2020 onwards.

3 National Trends

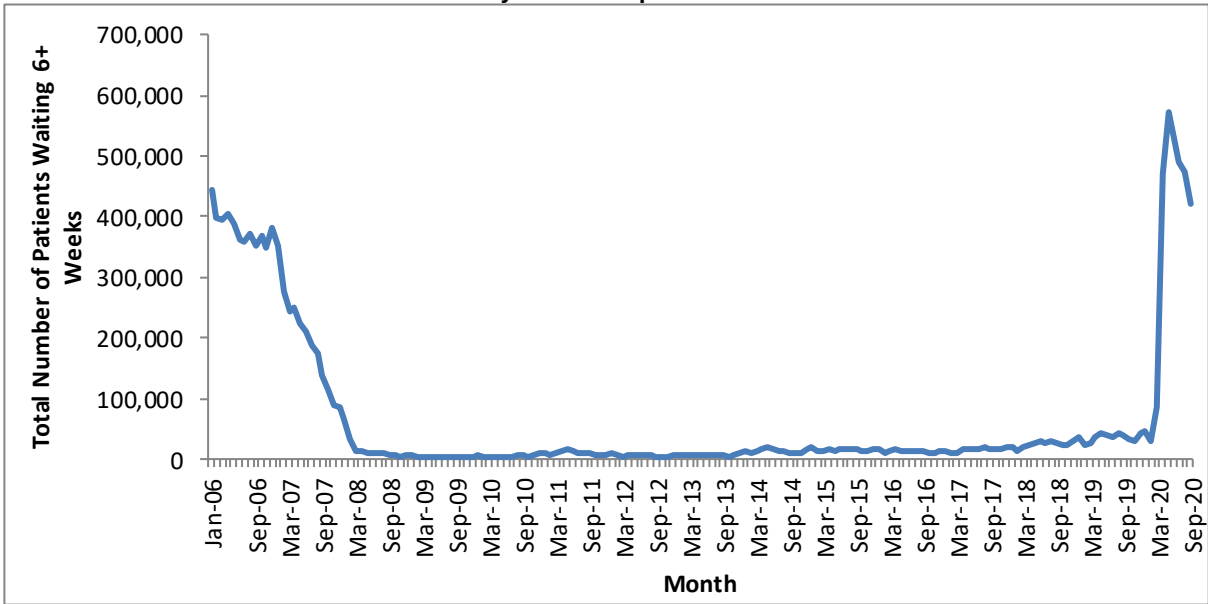
This section analyses trends in monthly diagnostic waiting times and activity data that has been collected since January 2006.

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 (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.

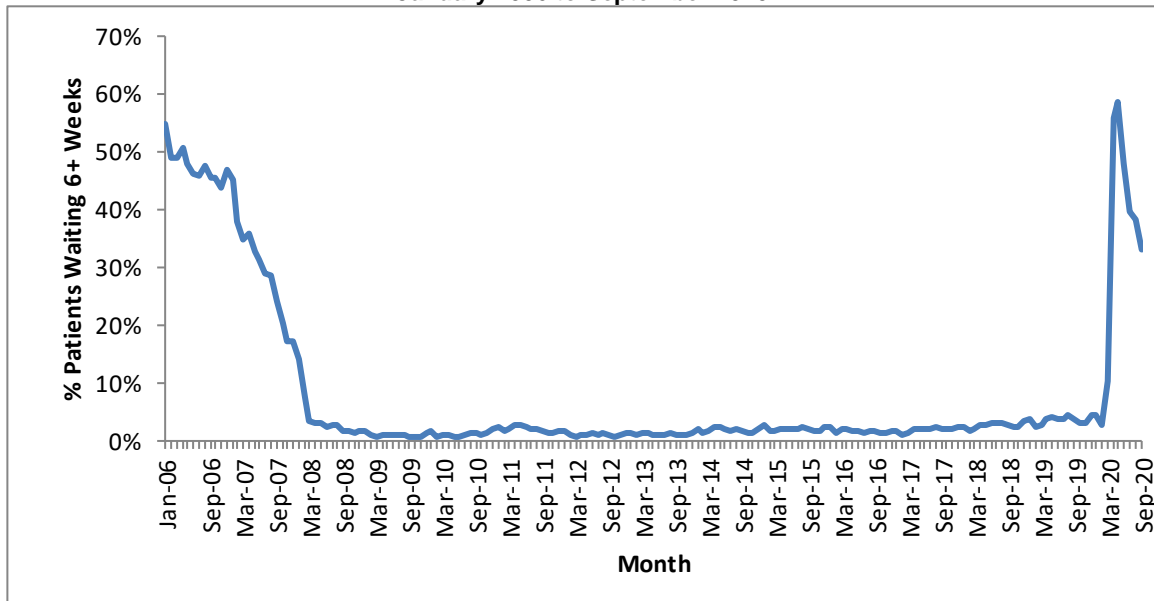
3.1.2. Since March 2008 there were fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more, with a significant rise between October 2013 and May 2014. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more subsequently rose sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In September 2020 there was a decrease of 51,600 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 September 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) prior to the COVID-19 period. 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.

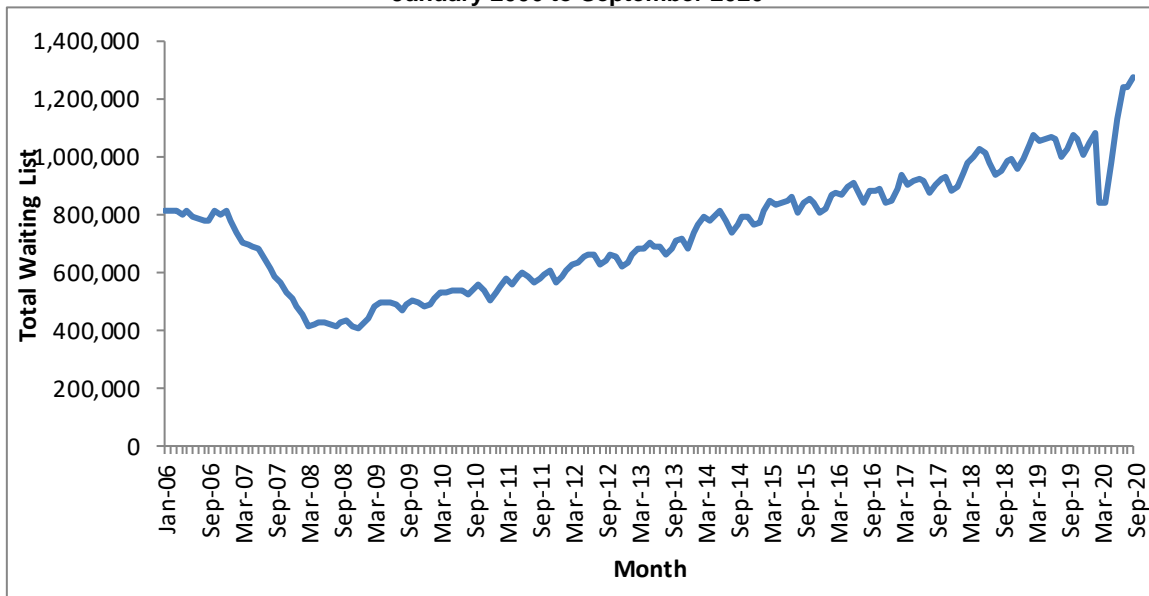
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to September 2020**



3.2 Total Waiting List

3.2.1. As 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). Following a period with a stable total waiting list between March 2008 and January 2009, the underlying trend showed a steady increase before dropping sharply in March 2020 and subsequently rising due to the impact of COVID-19.

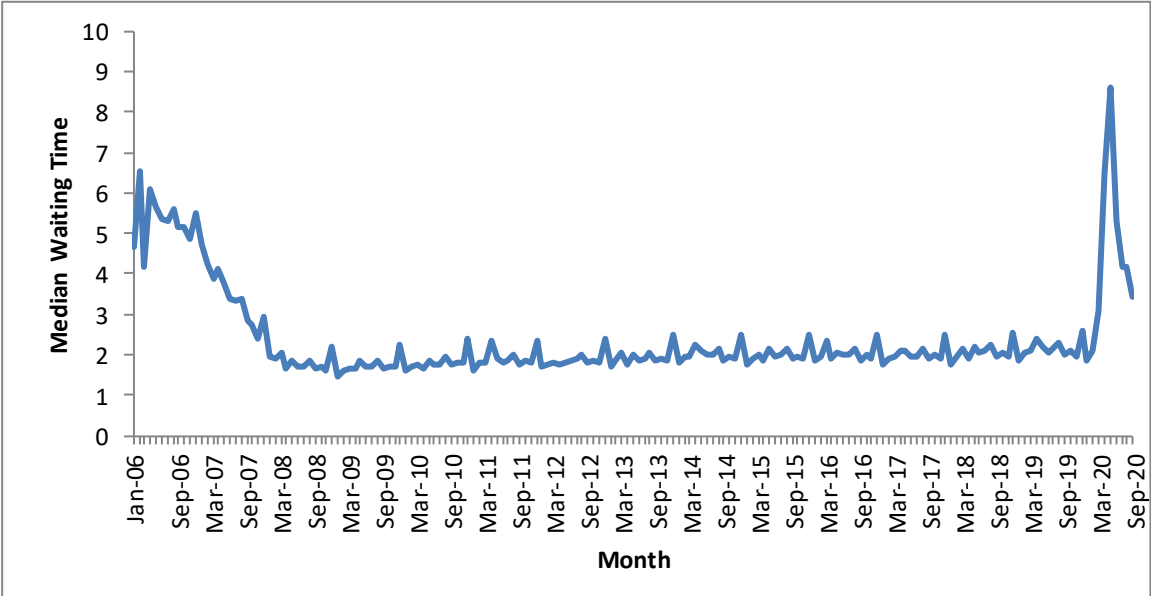
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to September 2020**



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 remained stable until the COVID-19 period (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 had a high of 8.6 weeks (May 2020) and a low of 1.9 weeks (January 2020). The median waiting time in September 2020 was 3.4 weeks.

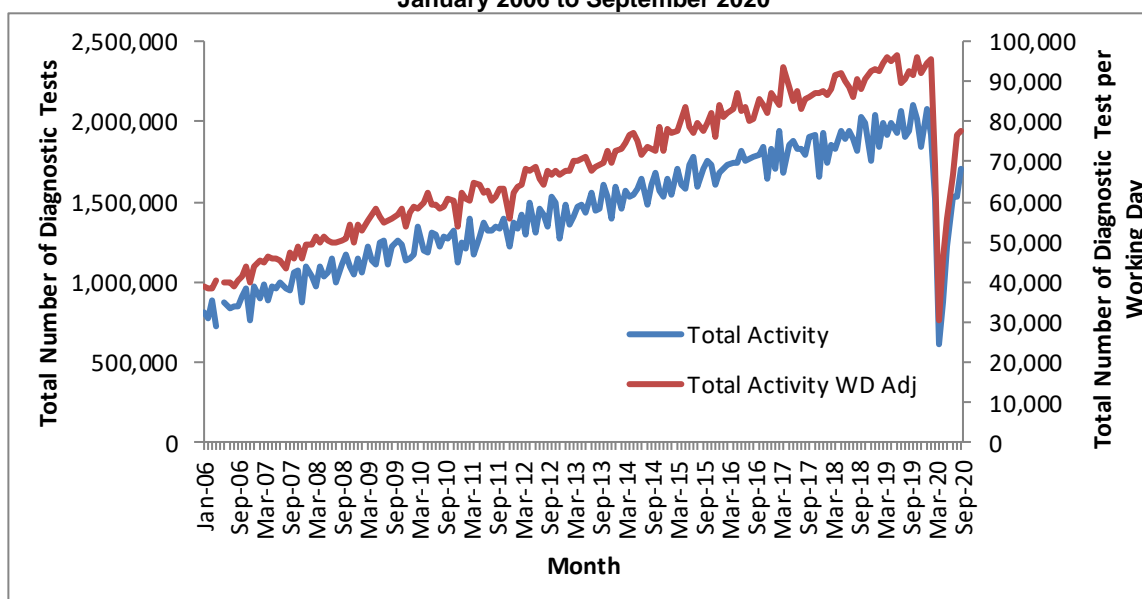
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to September 2020



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 until the COVID-19 period. If the data is adjusted to show activity per working day, the monthly variation becomes less pronounced (Chart 5).
- 3.4.2. Monthly activity decreased markedly following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Total activity in April 2020 fell by 68% compared to February 2020 but has subsequently started to recover.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to September 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 differing changes in activity. Tests with a small increase in activity were CT and Barium Enema, albeit with growth to September 2020 of less than 0.1% per month. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Electrophysiology, where September 2020 activity was 9.7% lower per month than September 2019 (Table 1).

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

	Sep-19	Sep-20	Average monthly growth
MRI	307,872	264,333	-1.3%
CT	522,395	524,377	0.0%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	638,429	543,835	-1.3%
Barium Enema	3,028	3,045	0.0%
Dexa Scan	40,246	32,907	-1.7%
Audiology Assessments	105,753	68,384	-3.6%
Echocardiography	135,361	119,516	-1.0%
Electrophysiology	2,128	627	-9.7%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,432	14,988	-2.1%
Sleep Studies	11,000	7,991	-2.6%
Urodynamics	6,761	4,697	-3.0%
Colonoscopy	45,989	39,752	-1.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	25,909	16,267	-3.8%
Cystoscopy	24,761	23,965	-0.3%
Gastroscopy	55,899	46,424	-1.5%
All Tests	1,944,963	1,711,108	-1.1%

4 September 2020 Data

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

6+ week waits performance was significantly worse in March, April and May 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, but this started to improve in June.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of September 2020, there were a total of 420,400 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 33.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with September 2019, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 381,700, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 29.3 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with September 2019, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Gastroscopy, which increased by 49.4 percentage points. The test with the smallest increase was Electrophysiology, which increased by 8.0 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Sep-19	Sep-20	Difference (%age points)
MRI	2.5%	22.6%	20.1
CT	2.9%	22.9%	20.0
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	2.3%	23.3%	21.0
Barium Enema	2.1%	14.2%	12.1
Dexa Scan	1.4%	43.7%	42.3
Audiology Assessments	1.8%	43.1%	41.2
Echocardiography	6.0%	42.8%	36.8
Electrophysiology	1.1%	9.1%	8.0
Peripheral Neurophysiology	5.6%	42.4%	36.8
Sleep Studies	5.5%	45.0%	39.6
Urodynamics	15.1%	56.7%	41.6
Colonoscopy	11.7%	54.5%	42.7
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	9.9%	57.2%	47.3
Cystoscopy	8.1%	46.1%	38.0
Gastroscopy	9.5%	58.9%	49.4
All Tests	3.8%	33.0%	29.3

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with September 2019, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with an increase of 45.6 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 38.4 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 21.9 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

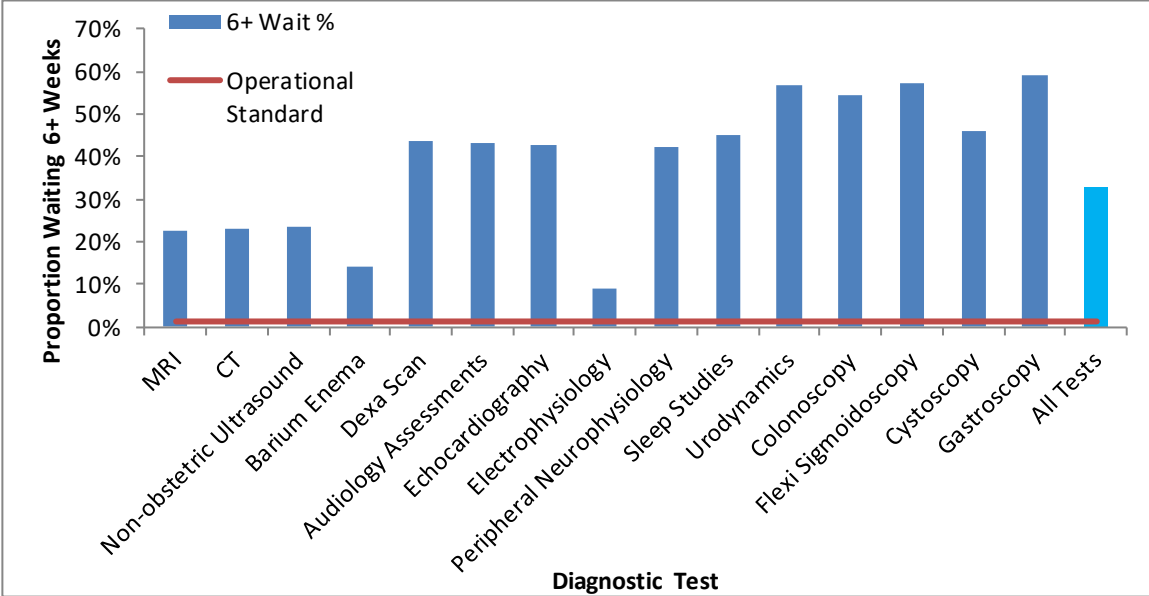
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – September 2019 and September 2020

	Sep-19	Sep-20	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	2.4%	24.3%	21.9
Physiological Measurement	5.0%	43.3%	38.4
Endoscopy	10.2%	55.8%	45.6
Total	3.8%	33.0%	29.3

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 (9.1%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Gastroscopy (58.9%) (Chart 6).

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



4.1.6. 139 of the 143 acute trusts that submitted data for September 2020 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. All 135 Commissioners¹ failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

¹ Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

- 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 26.2% (South East) and 37.8% (North West) (Table 4).
- 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 region.

Table 4: September 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	58,500	28.2%	207,582	275,784	4.0
South West	38,155	33.5%	113,967	167,763	4.0
South East	42,658	26.2%	162,916	256,903	3.4
Midlands	83,208	34.6%	240,639	307,372	4.4
East of England	58,411	37.0%	157,834	194,767	4.5
North West	72,865	37.8%	192,993	233,690	4.7
North East and Yorkshire	65,832	34.0%	193,480	264,375	4.0
England	419,629	33.1%	1,269,411	1,700,654	4.2

*Includes all independent sector providers.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of September 2020 there were a total of 1,272,300 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 249,300 (24.4%) from September 2019.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 32.1% of the total waiting list, or 408,900 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.04% of the total waiting list, or 500 patients (Table 5).

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

	Sep-19	Sep-20	Growth (%age)
MRI	195,632	215,463	10.1%
CT	132,781	154,685	16.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	372,442	408,949	9.8%
Barium Enema	1,678	1,761	4.9%
Dexa Scan	31,790	51,836	63.1%
Audiology Assessments	45,157	53,754	19.0%
Echocardiography	81,282	117,328	44.3%
Electrophysiology	1,250	472	-62.2%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,095	26,580	26.0%
Sleep Studies	9,754	10,636	9.0%
Urodynamics	4,739	7,475	57.7%
Colonoscopy	44,710	75,300	68.4%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	19,612	32,131	63.8%
Cystoscopy	15,062	24,272	61.1%
Gastroscopy	45,986	91,640	99.3%
All Tests	1,022,970	1,272,282	24.4%

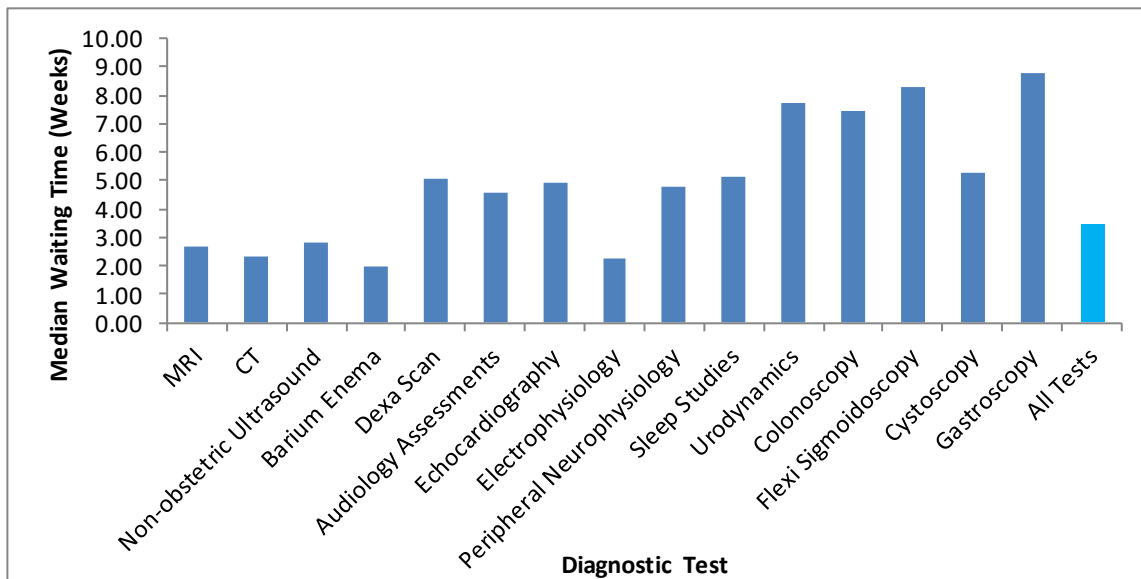
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Gastroscopy, where the waiting list grew by 99.3% compared with September 2019.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

- 4.3.1. At the end of September 2020, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.4 weeks from the time of referral, down from 4.1 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 2.0 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Gastroscopy at 8.8 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – September 2020



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,711,100 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during September 2020. This is a decrease of 233,900 (12.0%) from September 2019 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 543,800 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.8% of all activity in September 2020. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 600 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.04% of all activity this month.
- 4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has decreased by 19.0% from the same period last year (a decrease of 19.3% when adjusted for working days).

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

	Sep-20	Sep-19	YTD 20/21	YTD 19/20	Growth Sep 20 vs Sep 19	Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20	Adjusted Growth Sep 20 vs Sep 19	Adjusted Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20
MRI	264,333	307,872	1,189,771	1,839,093	-14.1%	-35.3%	-18.0%	-35.3%
CT	524,377	522,395	2,663,999	3,140,948	0.4%	-15.2%	-4.2%	-15.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	543,835	638,429	2,276,294	3,891,889	-14.8%	-41.5%	-18.7%	-41.5%
Barium Enema	3,045	3,028	12,999	18,489	0.6%	-29.7%	-4.0%	-29.7%
Dexa Scan	32,907	40,246	94,842	240,986	-18.2%	-60.6%	-22.0%	-60.6%
Audiology Assessments	68,384	105,753	220,479	640,001	-35.3%	-65.6%	-38.3%	-65.6%
Echocardiography	119,516	135,361	500,975	823,424	-11.7%	-39.2%	-15.7%	-39.2%
Electrophysiology	627	2,128	2,833	13,625	-70.5%	-79.2%	-71.9%	-79.2%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	14,988	19,432	52,191	115,788	-22.9%	-54.9%	-26.4%	-54.9%
Sleep Studies	7,991	11,000	29,702	64,016	-27.4%	-53.6%	-30.7%	-53.6%
Urodynamics	4,697	6,761	14,890	40,735	-30.5%	-63.4%	-33.7%	-63.4%
Colonoscopy	39,752	45,989	130,087	273,772	-13.6%	-52.5%	-17.5%	-52.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,267	25,909	54,599	158,112	-37.2%	-65.5%	-40.1%	-65.5%
Cystoscopy	23,965	24,761	94,030	151,616	-3.2%	-38.0%	-7.6%	-38.0%
Gastroscopy	46,424	55,899	148,099	348,097	-17.0%	-57.5%	-20.7%	-57.5%
All Tests	1,711,108	1,944,963	7,485,790	11,760,591	-12.0%	-36.3%	-16.0%	-36.3%

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

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 patients have been waiting for a diagnostic test. The median is the middle value when waiting times are put in numerical order. 50% of patients have been waiting 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 [here](#).

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:

Sheila Dixon
Performance Analysis Team (Central), NHS England and NHS Improvement
Room 5E15, Quarry House, Quarry Hill, Leeds LS2 7UE
Email: england.nhsdata@nhs.net