

# 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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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 October 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 October 2020 was 362,100. This was 29.2% 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 October 2019 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 328,900, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 26.1 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 October 2020, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology with 7.4%. The test with the highest proportion was Gastroscopy, with 55.5% 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 3.3 weeks at the end of October 2020.
- There were 1,239,100 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of October 2020. This is an increase of 167,400 from October 2019. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has continued to show 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 1,803,500 diagnostic tests were undertaken in October 2020. This is a decrease of 300,000 from October 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

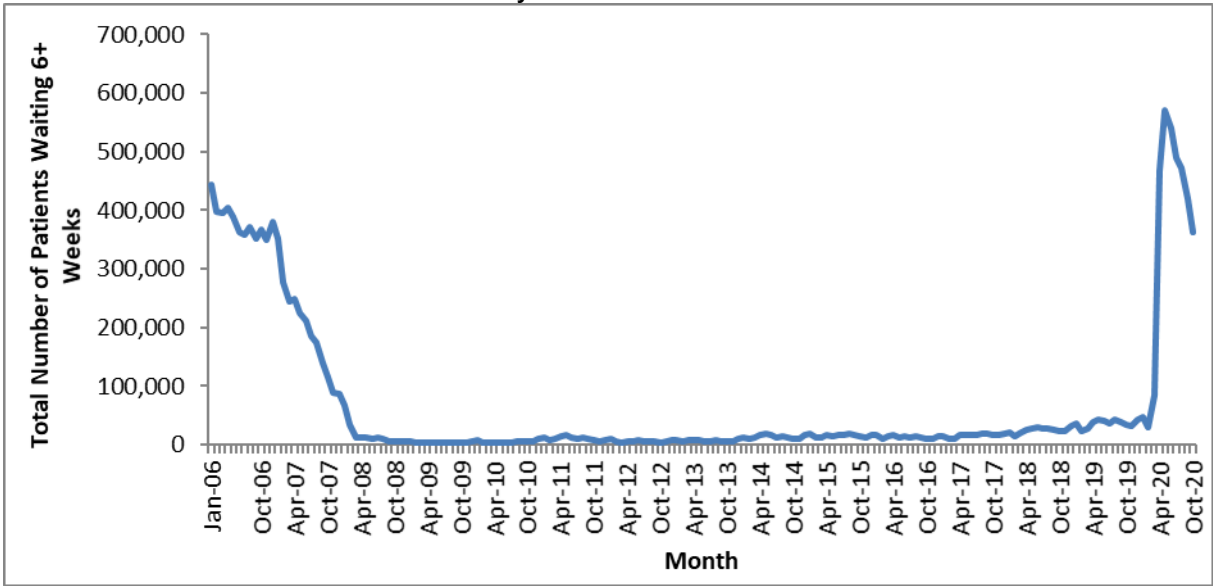
This section analyses trends in monthly diagnostic waiting times and activity data that has been collected since January 2006.

#### 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.

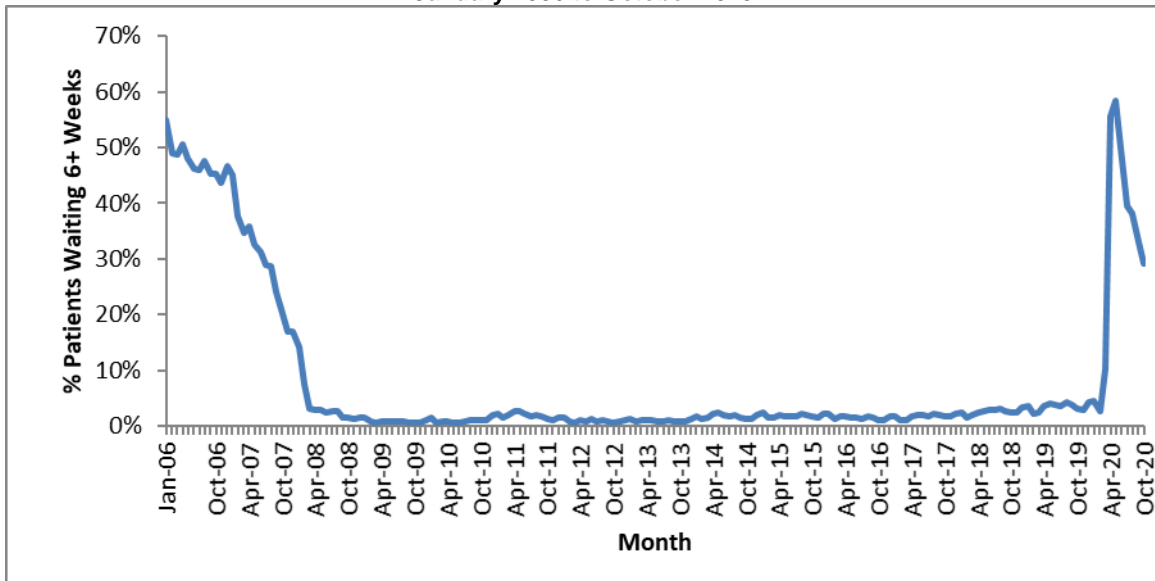
3.1.2. Since March 2008 there were fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more, with a significant rise between October 2013 and May 2014. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more subsequently rose sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In October 2020 there was a decrease of 58,400 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 October 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.

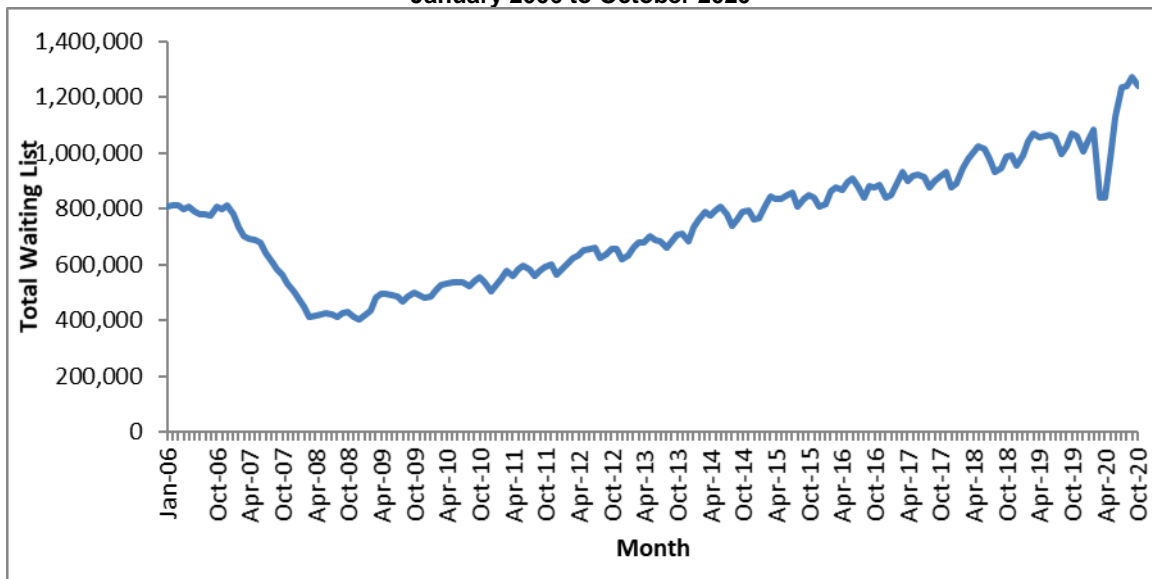
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests  
January 2006 to October 2020**



### 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 October 2020**

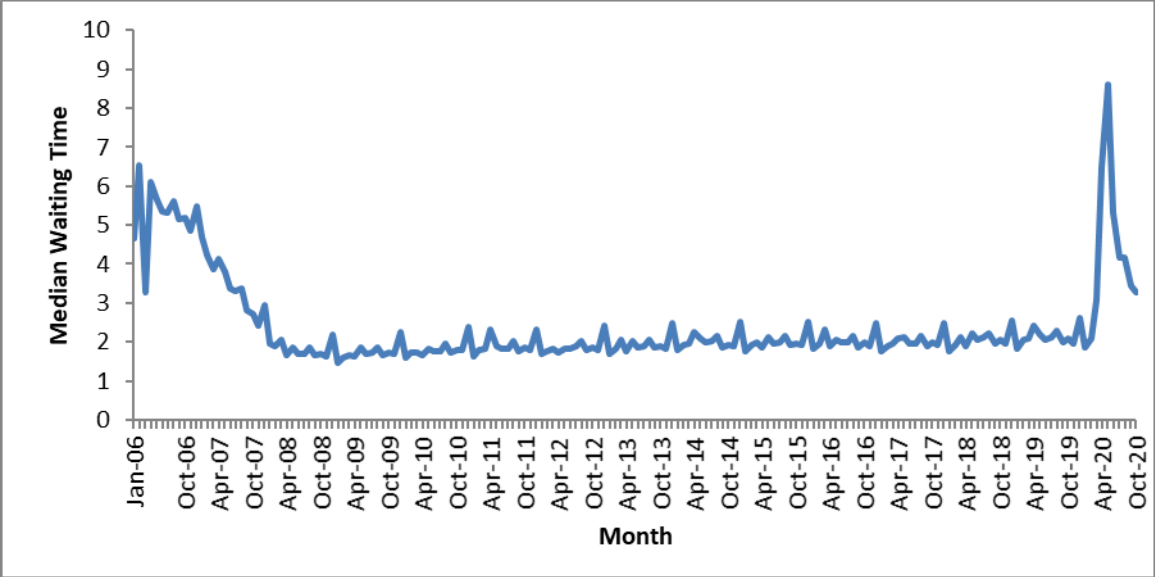




### 3.3 Median Waiting Time

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 October 2020 was 3.3 weeks.

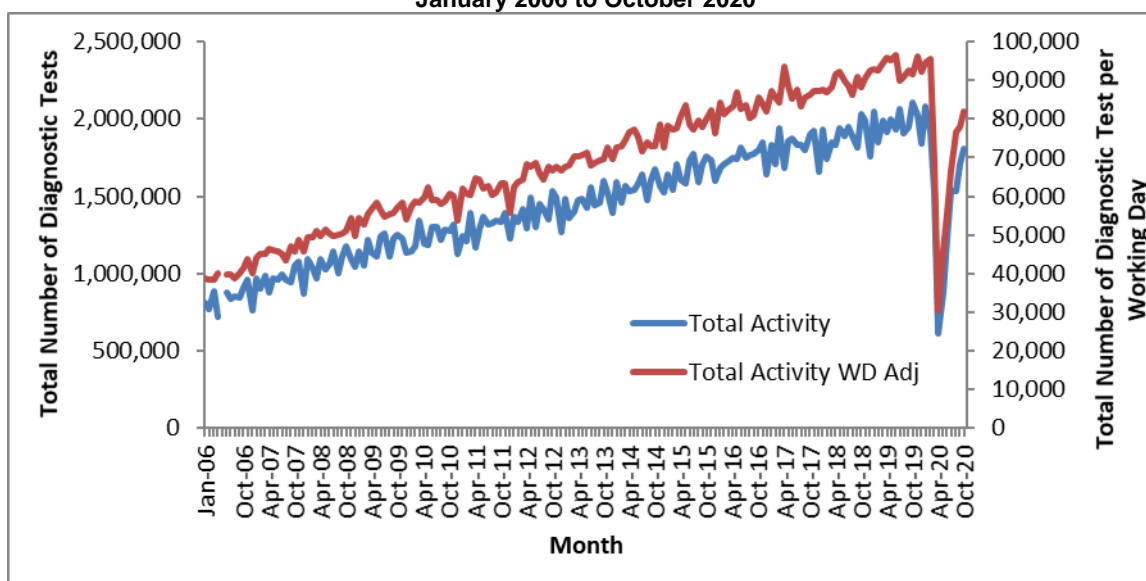
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to October 2020



### 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 October 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. The test with the smallest reduction in activity was CT, with 0.2% per month to October 2020. The test with the largest reduction in activity was Electrophysiology, where October 2020 activity was 12.3% lower per month than in September 2019 (Table 1).

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

	Oct-19	Oct-20	Average monthly growth
MRI	326,774	281,627	-1.2%
CT	555,419	541,495	-0.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	699,534	572,965	-1.6%
Barium Enema	3,275	2,947	-0.9%
Dexa Scan	44,388	34,983	-2.0%
Audiology Assessments	118,158	71,566	-4.1%
Echocardiography	146,139	124,451	-1.3%
Electrophysiology	2,175	453	-12.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,547	16,324	-1.9%
Sleep Studies	11,887	8,591	-2.7%
Urodynamics	7,401	5,001	-3.2%
Colonoscopy	50,678	46,295	-0.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	29,088	17,784	-4.0%
Cystoscopy	27,725	25,847	-0.6%
Gastroscopy	60,303	53,158	-1.0%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>2,103,491</b>	<b>1,803,487</b>	<b>-1.3%</b>

## 4 October 2020 Data

This section analyses the October 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 October 2020, there were a total of 362,100 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 29.2% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with October 2019, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 328,900, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 26.1 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with October 2019, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Gastroscopy, which increased by 46.5 percentage points. The test with the smallest increase was Electrophysiology, which increased by 4.8 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Oct-19	Oct-20	Difference (%age points)
MRI	2.0%	19.6%	17.7
CT	2.4%	20.4%	18.0
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	1.7%	19.3%	17.6
Barium Enema	2.2%	9.7%	7.5
Dexa Scan	0.5%	39.0%	38.5
Audiology Assessments	1.5%	36.6%	35.1
Echocardiography	4.6%	39.8%	35.2
Electrophysiology	2.5%	7.4%	4.8
Peripheral Neurophysiology	4.1%	35.1%	31.0
Sleep Studies	4.2%	34.2%	30.0
Urodynamics	14.3%	51.2%	37.0
Colonoscopy	10.5%	51.3%	40.8
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	8.5%	53.3%	44.9
Cystoscopy	7.3%	44.8%	37.5
Gastroscopy	9.0%	55.5%	46.5
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>29.2%</b>	<b>26.1</b>

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with October 2019, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with an increase of 43.3 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by 34.5 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 18.9 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

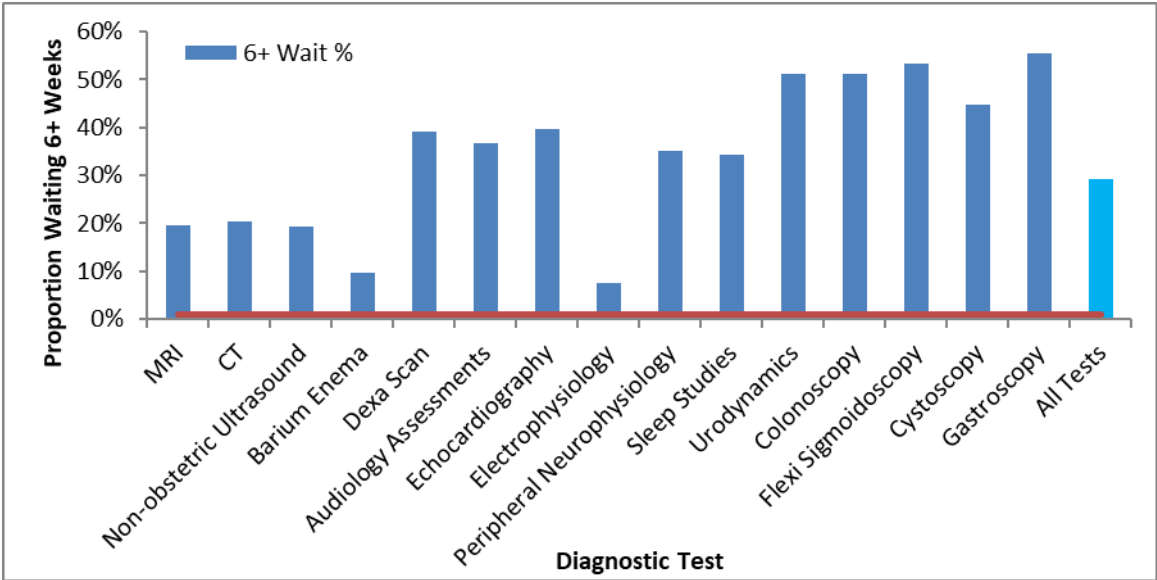
**Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – October 2019 and October 2020**

	Oct-19	Oct-20	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	1.8%	20.7%	<b>18.9</b>
Physiological Measurement	3.9%	38.5%	<b>34.5</b>
Endoscopy	9.3%	52.6%	<b>43.3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>29.2%</b>	<b>26.1</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 Electrophysiology (7.4%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Gastroscopy (46.5%) (Chart 6).

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



4.1.6. 136 of the 141 acute trusts that submitted data for October 2020 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. All 135 Commissioners<sup>1</sup> failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

<sup>1</sup> 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 22.1% (South East) and 34.4% (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	44,822	22.8%	196,689	297,442	2.9
South West	34,222	30.3%	112,897	176,955	3.3
South East	35,699	22.1%	161,394	262,765	2.8
Midlands	74,221	31.7%	234,476	325,127	3.5
East of England	51,671	32.9%	157,024	208,316	3.6
North West	64,553	34.4%	187,489	242,214	3.7
North East and Yorkshire	56,207	30.2%	186,418	279,138	3.3
<b>England</b>	<b>362,084</b>	<b>29.2%</b>	<b>1,239,114</b>	<b>1,803,487</b>	<b>3.3</b>

\*Includes all independent sector providers.

## 4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of October 2020 there were a total of 1,239,100 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 167,400 (15.6%) from October 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 402,000 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 – October 2019 and October 2020**

	Oct-19	Oct-20	Growth (%age)
MRI	214,034	215,355	0.6%
CT	139,800	146,533	4.8%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	382,401	402,005	5.1%
Barium Enema	1,677	1,687	0.6%
Dexa Scan	32,053	46,889	46.3%
Audiology Assessments	44,890	53,845	19.9%
Echocardiography	83,443	118,377	41.9%
Electrophysiology	1,577	528	-66.5%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	22,479	26,182	16.5%
Sleep Studies	9,836	10,453	6.3%
Urodynamics	5,085	7,282	43.2%
Colonoscopy	47,227	70,354	49.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	21,307	29,832	40.0%
Cystoscopy	15,829	23,196	46.5%
Gastroscopy	50,122	86,596	72.8%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,071,760</b>	<b>1,239,114</b>	<b>15.6%</b>

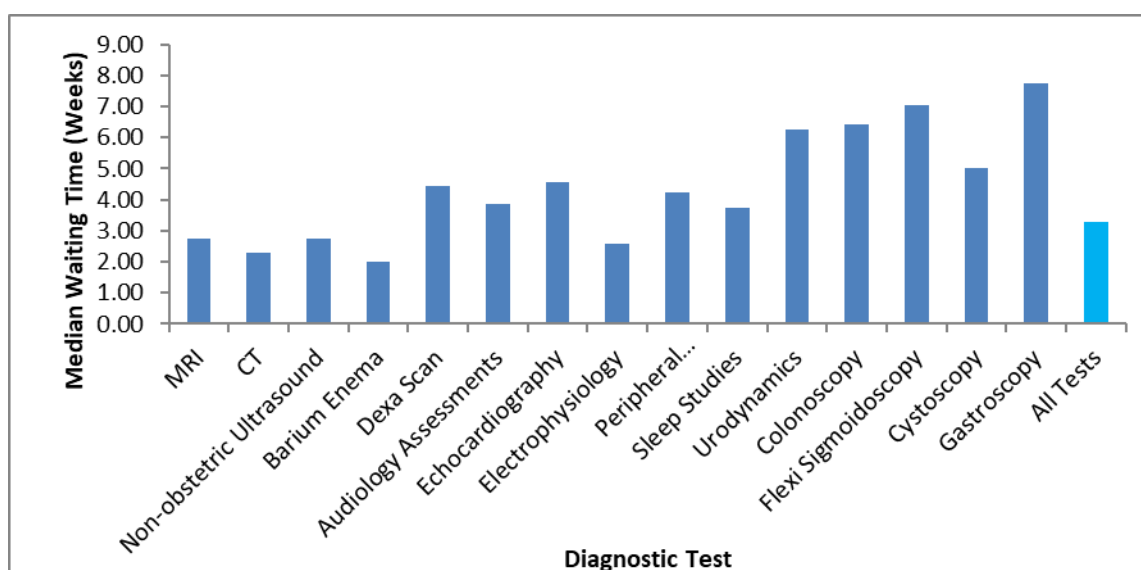
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Gastroscopy, where the waiting list grew by 72.8% compared with October 2019.

## 4.3 Median Waiting Times

- 4.3.1. At the end of October 2020, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.3 weeks from the time of referral, down from 3.4 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 7.7 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – October 2020



## 4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,803,500 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during October 2020. This is a decrease of 300,000 (14.3%) from October 2019 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 573,000 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.8% of all activity in October 2020. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 500 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 0.3% from the same period last year.

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

	Oct-20	Oct-19	YTD 20/21	YTD 19/20	Growth Oct 20 vs Oct 19	Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20	Adjusted Growth Oct 20 vs Oct 19	Adjusted Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20
MRI	281,627	326,774	1,471,398	2,165,867	-13.8%	-32.1%	-9.9%	-31.6%
CT	541,495	555,419	3,205,494	3,696,367	-2.5%	-13.3%	1.9%	-12.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	572,965	699,534	2,849,259	4,591,423	-18.1%	-37.9%	-14.4%	-37.5%
Barium Enema	2,947	3,275	15,946	21,764	-10.0%	-26.7%	-5.9%	-26.2%
Dexa Scan	34,983	44,388	129,825	285,374	-21.2%	-54.5%	-17.6%	-54.2%
Audiology Assessments	71,566	118,158	292,045	758,159	-39.4%	-61.5%	-36.7%	-61.2%
Echocardiography	124,451	146,139	625,426	969,563	-14.8%	-35.5%	-11.0%	-35.1%
Electrophysiology	453	2,175	3,286	15,800	-79.2%	-79.2%	-78.2%	-79.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,324	20,547	68,515	136,335	-20.6%	-49.7%	-16.9%	-49.4%
Sleep Studies	8,591	11,887	38,293	75,903	-27.7%	-49.6%	-24.4%	-49.2%
Urodynamics	5,001	7,401	19,891	48,136	-32.4%	-58.7%	-29.4%	-58.4%
Colonoscopy	46,295	50,678	176,382	324,450	-8.6%	-45.6%	-4.5%	-45.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,784	29,088	72,383	187,200	-38.9%	-61.3%	-36.1%	-61.1%
Cystoscopy	25,847	27,725	119,877	179,341	-6.8%	-33.2%	-2.5%	-32.7%
Gastroscopy	53,158	60,303	201,257	408,400	-11.8%	-50.7%	-7.8%	-50.4%
<b>All Tests</b>	<b>1,803,487</b>	<b>2,103,491</b>	<b>9,289,277</b>	<b>13,864,082</b>	<b>-14.3%</b>	<b>-33.0%</b>	<b>-10.4%</b>	<b>-32.5%</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 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](mailto: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](mailto:nhsengland.media@nhs.net)

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

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