

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



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March 2021 Monthly Report

Version number: 1.0

First published: 13 May 2021

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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 2020/21.

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 March 2021 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and data for the current reporting period may therefore not be comparable to previous periods.
- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of March 2021 was 305,100. This was 24.3% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or more was not met this month.
- Compared with March 2020 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 219,600 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 14.1 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 24.3% (March 2021) and 58.5% (May 2020).
- At the end of March 2021, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology with 8.5%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 54.8% 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 2.8 weeks at the end of March 2021.
- There were 1,255,900 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of March 2021. This is an increase of 417,300 from March 2020. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has increased, with a reduction in March 2020 as a result of COVID-19 followed by growth in the waiting list and some subsequent reductions.
- A total of 1,933,600 diagnostic tests were undertaken in March 2021. This is an increase of 412,800 from March 2020. Monthly activity was increasing slightly until it fell sharply from March 2020 before services started to resume from May 2020 onwards.

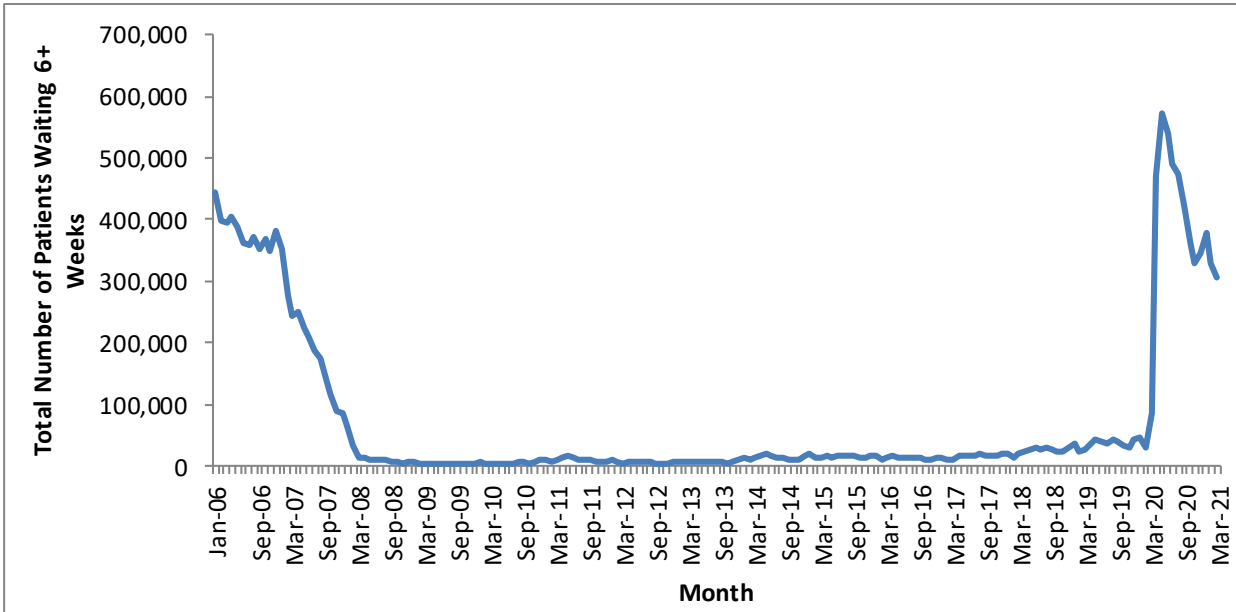
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

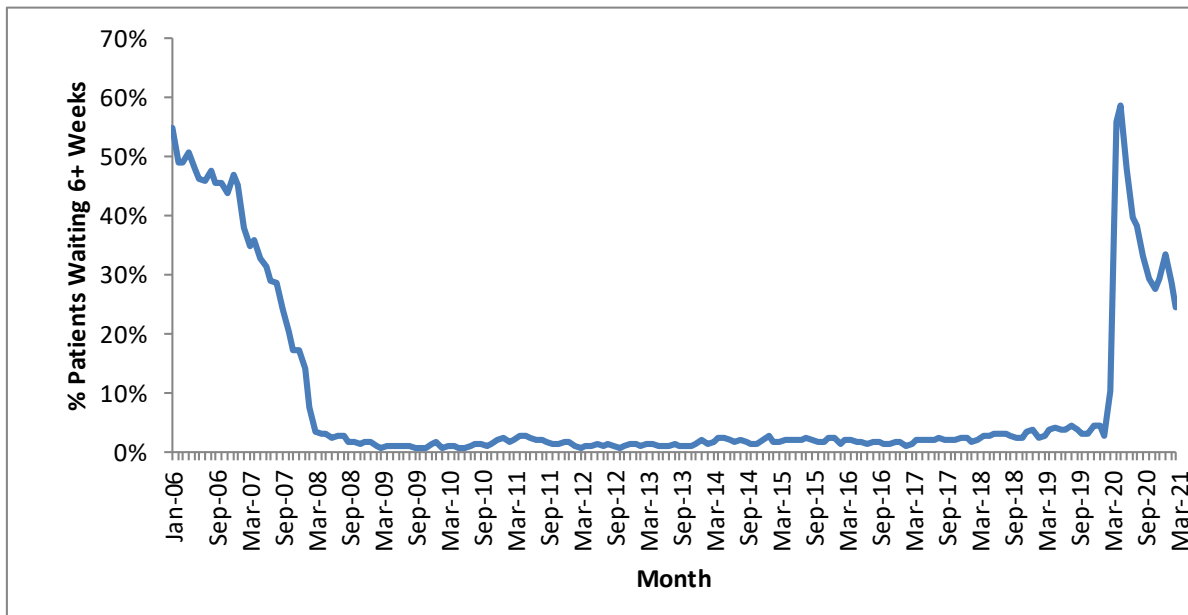
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 there were fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more, with a significant rise between December 2013 and May 2014. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more rose sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In March 2021 there was a decrease of 22,600 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to March 2021



- 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 24.3% (March 2021) and 58.5% (May 2020). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

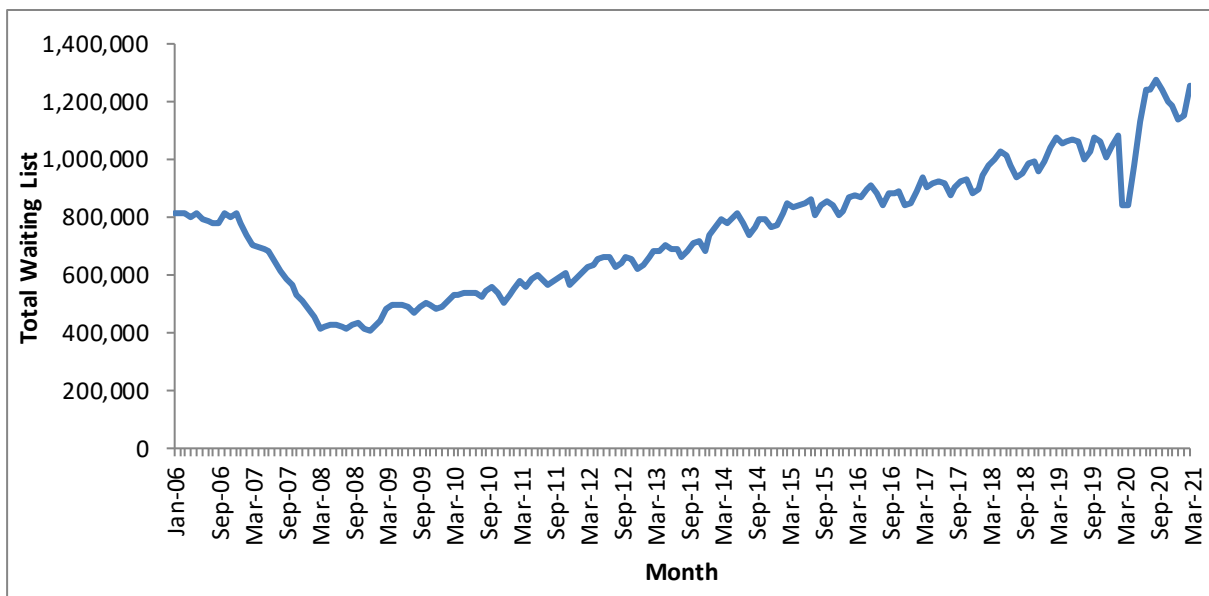
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2021**



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.

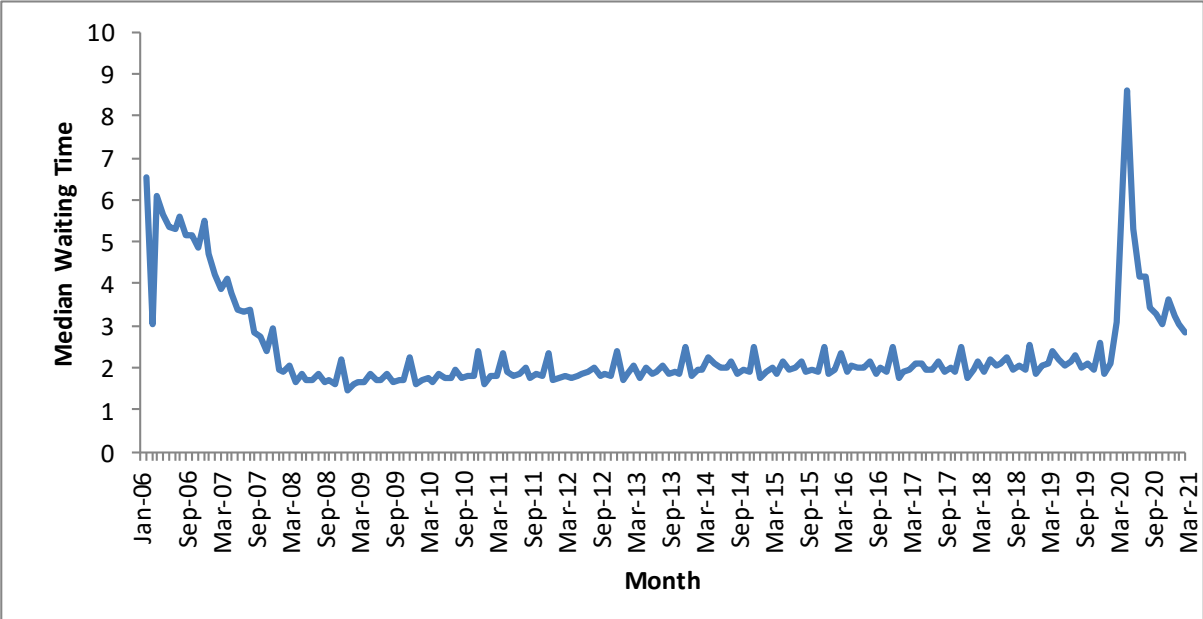
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2021**



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 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 higher number of bank holidays and resulting lower activity. In the last 12 months, the median waiting time had a high of 8.6 weeks (May 2020) and a low of 2.8 weeks (March 2021). The median waiting time in March 2021 was 2.8 weeks.

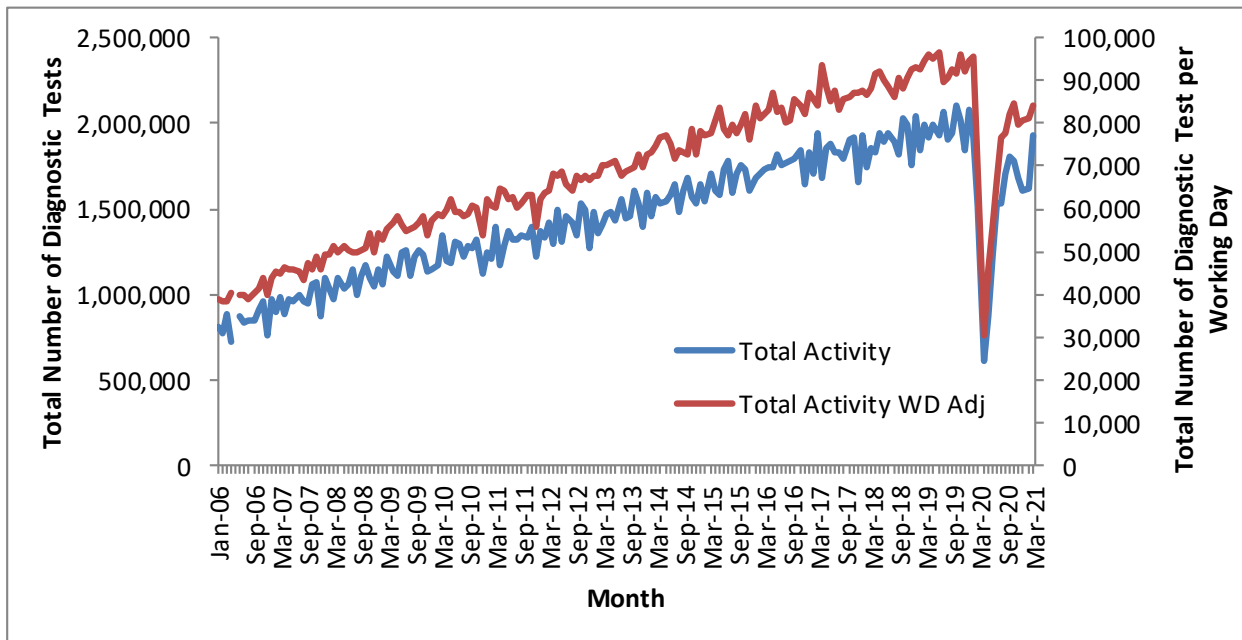
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to March 2021



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 April 2019 but subsequently started to recover until the latest months.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to March 2021**



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 largest reduction in activity was Urodynamics where March 2021 activity was 0.2% lower per month than March 2020 (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – March 2020 and March 2021

	Mar-20	Mar-21	Average monthly growth
MRI	256,361	302,986	1.4%
CT	436,903	579,815	2.4%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	486,588	621,740	2.1%
Barium Enema	2,271	2,786	1.7%
Dexa Scan	26,145	32,187	1.7%
Audiology Assessments	68,352	73,930	0.7%
Echocardiography	101,243	132,052	2.2%
Electrophysiology	712	933	2.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	13,291	16,434	1.8%
Sleep Studies	7,133	8,880	1.8%
Urodynamics	4,980	4,883	-0.2%
Colonoscopy	35,851	50,821	3.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,809	18,601	-0.1%
Cystoscopy	19,502	27,793	3.0%
Gastroscopy	42,599	59,712	2.9%
All Tests	1,520,740	1,933,553	2.0%

4 March 2021 Data

This section analyses the March 2021 diagnostic waiting times and activity data and includes comparisons between tests, regions, providers and commissioners.

6+ week waits performance became significantly worse from March to May 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis but started to improve from June.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of March 2021, there were a total of 305,100 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 24.3% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with March 2020, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 219,600, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 14.1 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with March 2020, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Urodynamics, which increased by 29.5 percentage points. The test with the smallest increase was Barium Enema, which increased by 4.7 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2020 and March 2021

	Mar-20	Mar-21	Difference (%age points)
MRI	9.7%	17.0%	7.3
CT	7.6%	16.0%	8.4
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	6.3%	15.4%	9.1
Barium Enema	5.2%	9.9%	4.7
Dexa Scan	8.6%	36.2%	27.6
Audiology Assessments	8.0%	23.7%	15.7
Echocardiography	11.5%	37.2%	25.7
Electrophysiology	3.7%	8.5%	4.8
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17.1%	36.1%	19.0
Sleep Studies	15.8%	24.4%	8.6
Urodynamics	25.3%	54.8%	29.5
Colonoscopy	20.9%	45.1%	24.2
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	20.9%	47.4%	26.6
Cystoscopy	17.1%	41.9%	24.8
Gastroscopy	19.0%	46.8%	27.8
All Tests	10.2%	24.3%	14.1

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with March 2020, the test type with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with an increase of 26.0 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased

by 22.2 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 9.4 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

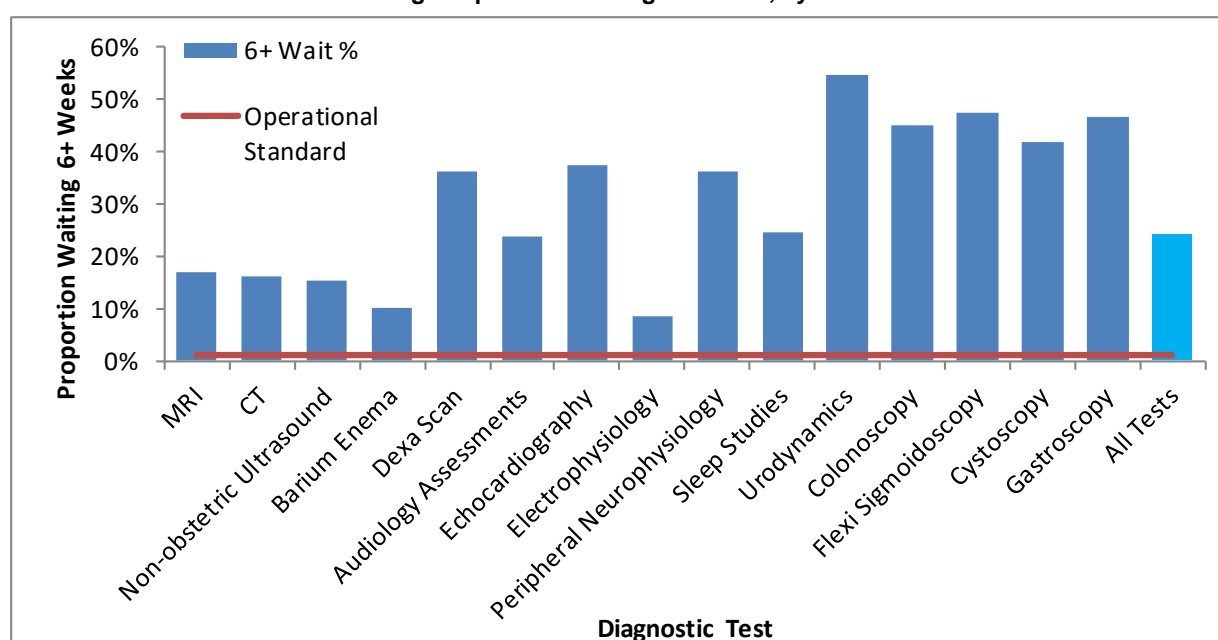
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – March 2020 and March 2021

	Mar-20	Mar-21	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	7.6%	17.0%	9.4
Physiological Measurement	12.0%	34.2%	22.2
Endoscopy	19.8%	45.7%	26.0
Total	10.2%	24.3%	14.1

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 (8.5%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (54.8%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2021



4.1.6. 135 of the 141 acute trusts that submitted data for March 2021 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. All 135 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 weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 18.2% (South East) and 32.6% (East of England) (Table 4).

¹ Includes NHS England and NHS Improvement

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: March 2021 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	34,539	18.5%	186,826	306,464	2.4
South West	29,986	24.9%	120,553	188,711	3.0
South East	30,114	18.2%	165,327	296,773	2.4
Midlands	62,966	26.4%	238,599	341,444	3.0
East of England	50,175	32.6%	153,943	210,810	3.4
North West	49,060	25.9%	189,185	277,782	3.0
North East and Yorkshire	47,735	24.0%	199,090	298,835	2.9
England	304,575	24.3%	1,253,523	1,920,819	2.8

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

4.2.1. At the end of March 2021 there were a total of 1,255,900 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 417,300 (49.8%) from March 2020.

4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 34.0% of the total waiting list, or 427,300 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 – March 2020 and March 2021

	Mar-20	Mar-21	Growth (%age)
MRI	160,769	224,841	39.9%
CT	115,602	152,706	32.1%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	271,316	427,313	57.5%
Barium Enema	1,196	1,533	28.2%
Dexa Scan	26,366	45,161	71.3%
Audiology Assessments	33,990	46,595	37.1%
Echocardiography	71,643	123,330	72.1%
Electrophysiology	590	504	-14.6%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,712	27,417	64.1%
Sleep Studies	7,933	8,685	9.5%
Urodynamics	4,912	8,083	64.6%
Colonoscopy	44,561	63,637	42.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	20,261	26,955	33.0%
Cystoscopy	14,570	23,173	59.0%
Gastroscopy	48,148	75,932	57.7%
All Tests	838,569	1,255,865	49.8%

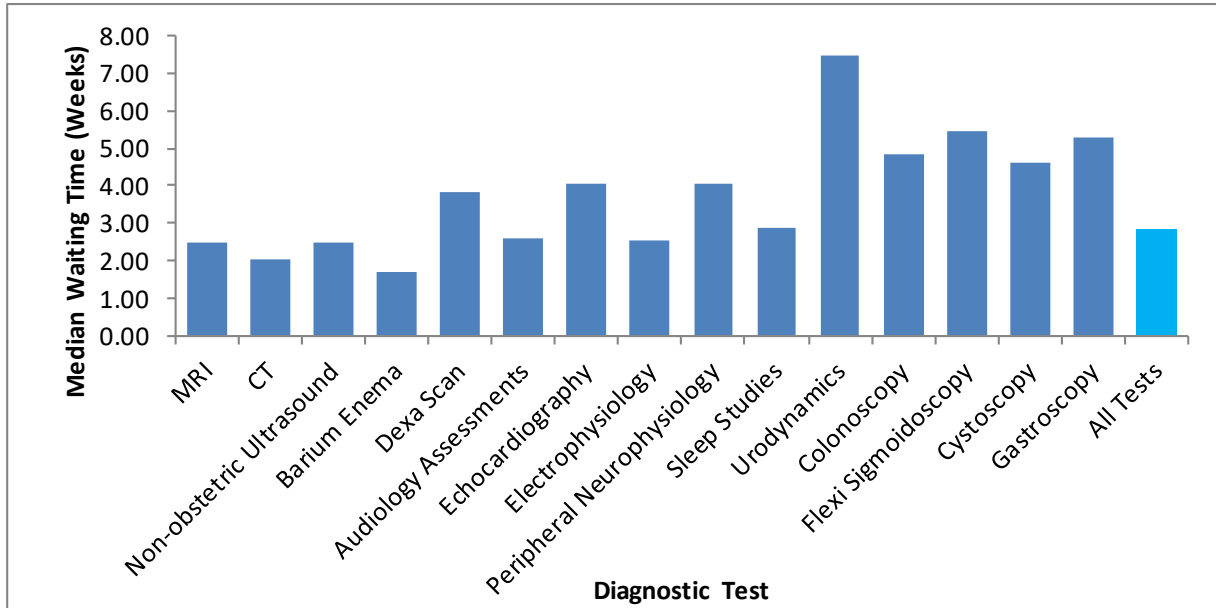
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Echocardiography, where the waiting list grew by 72.1% compared with March 2020.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of March 2021, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.8 weeks from the time of referral, down from 3.0 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 1.7 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 7.5 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – March 2021



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,933,600 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during March 2021. This is an increase of 412,800 (21.6%) from March 2020 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 621,700 tests taking place. This accounted for 32.2% of all activity in March 2021. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 900 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.05% of all activity this month.
- 4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has decreased by 22.6% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – March 2020 and March 2021

	Mar-21	Mar-20	YTD 20/21	YTD 19/20	Growth Mar 21 vs Mar 20	Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20	Adjusted Growth Mar 21 vs Mar 20	Adjusted Growth YTD 20/21 vs YTD 19/20
MRI	302,986	256,361	2,843,284	3,651,772	18.2%	-22.1%	13.0%	-21.8%
CT	579,815	436,903	5,839,342	6,274,382	32.7%	-6.9%	26.9%	-6.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	621,740	486,588	5,590,926	7,643,244	27.8%	-26.9%	22.2%	-26.6%
Barium Enema	2,786	2,271	28,753	35,839	22.7%	-19.8%	17.3%	-19.5%
Dexa Scan	32,187	26,145	270,786	467,281	23.1%	-42.1%	17.8%	-41.8%
Audiology Assessments	73,930	68,352	619,636	1,249,331	8.2%	-50.4%	3.5%	-50.2%
Echocardiography	132,052	101,243	1,215,286	1,618,560	30.4%	-24.9%	24.8%	-24.6%
Electrophysiology	933	712	6,843	21,271	31.0%	-67.8%	25.3%	-67.7%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,434	13,291	142,222	230,004	23.6%	-38.2%	18.3%	-37.9%
Sleep Studies	8,880	7,133	76,725	126,964	24.5%	-39.6%	19.1%	-39.3%
Urodynamics	4,883	4,980	41,511	79,789	-1.9%	-48.0%	-6.2%	-47.8%
Colonoscopy	50,821	35,851	392,315	547,679	41.8%	-28.4%	35.6%	-28.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,601	18,809	152,898	312,125	-1.1%	-51.0%	-5.4%	-50.8%
Cystoscopy	27,793	19,502	237,116	298,940	42.5%	-20.7%	36.3%	-20.4%
Gastroscopy	59,712	42,599	451,554	683,163	40.2%	-33.9%	34.1%	-33.6%
All Tests	1,933,553	1,520,740	17,909,197	23,240,344	27.1%	-22.9%	21.6%	-22.6%

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

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.

Region

One of seven geographical areas of NHS England and NHS Improvement responsible for the quality, financial and operational performance of all NHS organisations in their region.

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 March 2020 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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