

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



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April 2021 Monthly Report

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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 April 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 April 2021 was 310,800. This was 24.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month and the best performance in the last 12 months.
- Nationally, the operational standard of less than 1% of patients waiting six weeks or more was not met this month.
- Compared with April 2020 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 158,100 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 31.7 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 24.0% (April 2021) and 58.5% (May 2020).
- At the end of April 2021, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 9.6%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 52.6% 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 2.7 weeks at the end of April 2021.
- There were 1,293,500 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of April 2021. This is an increase of 452,400 from April 2020. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has increased, which followed on from 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 1,847,500 diagnostic tests were undertaken in April 2021. This is an increase of 1,237,300 from April 2020. Monthly activity was increasing slightly until it fell sharply from March 2020 before services started to resume from May 2020 onwards.

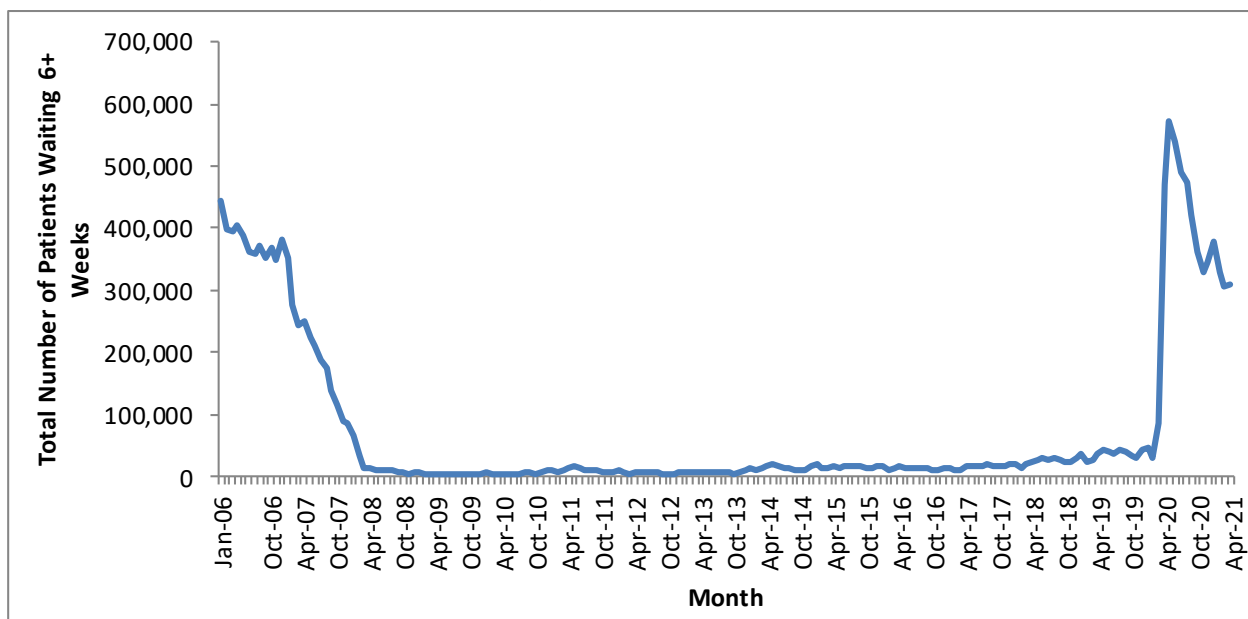
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

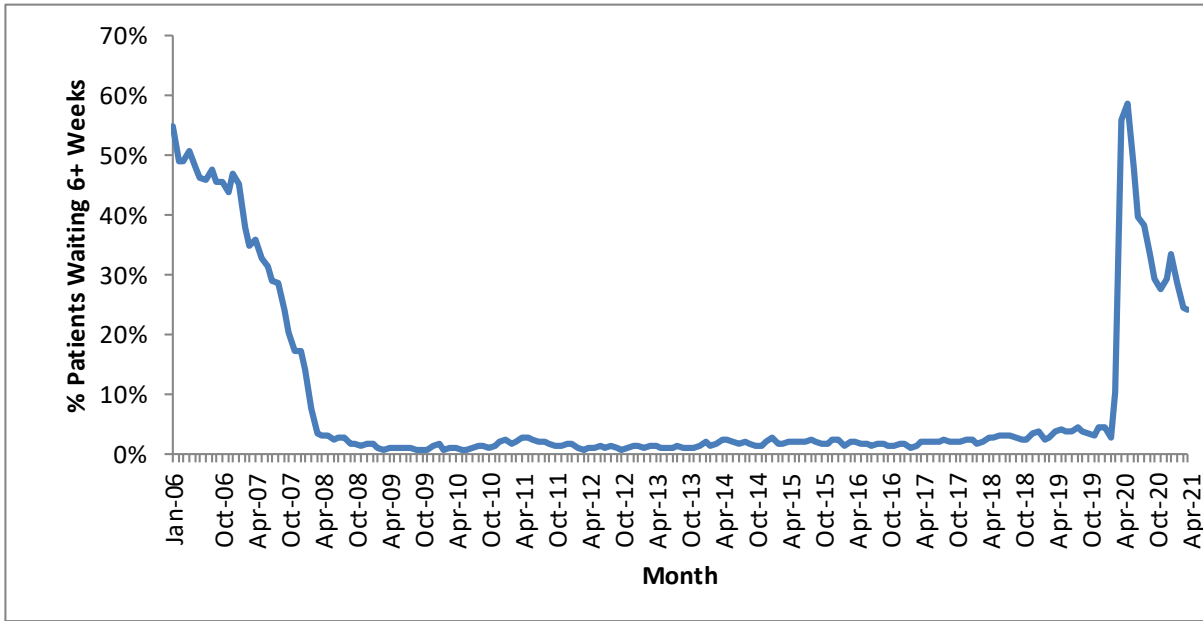
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 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 April 2021 there was an increase of 5,700 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to April 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 24.0% (April 2021) and 58.5% (May 2020). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

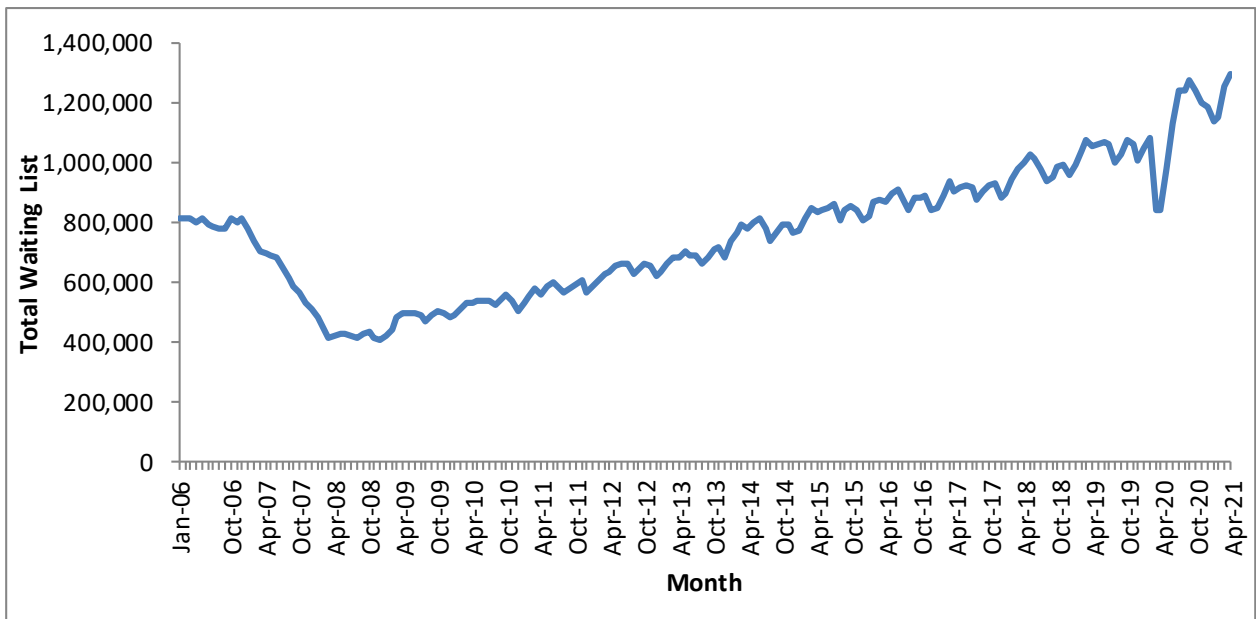
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to April 2021**



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.

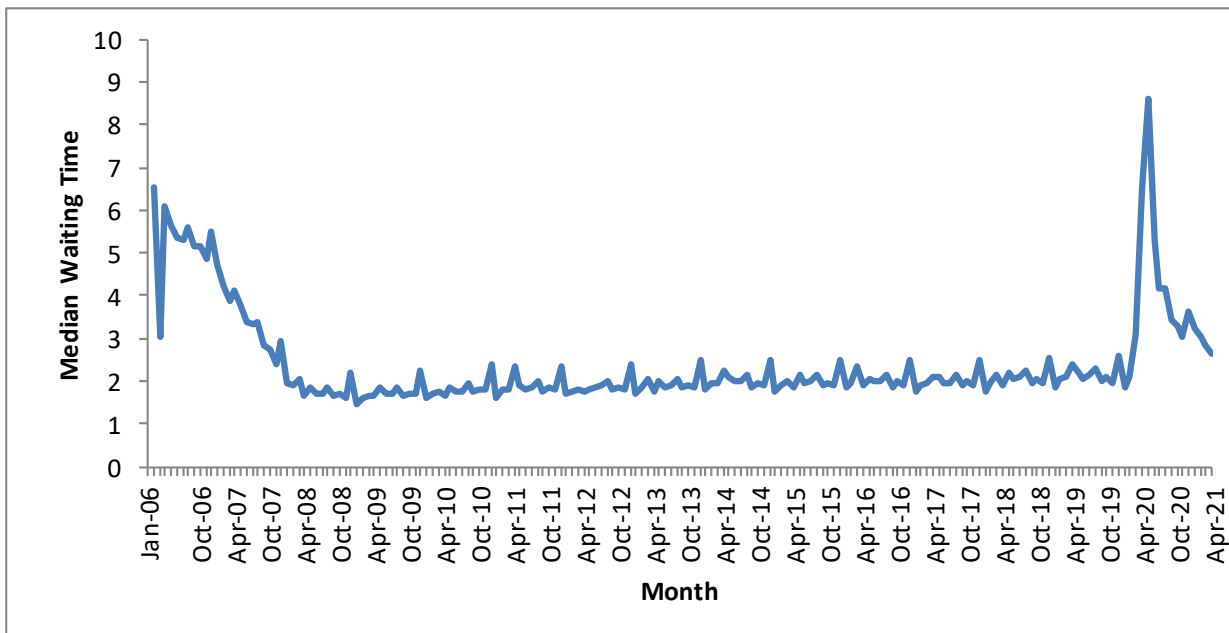
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to April 2021**



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 2.7 weeks (April 2021). The median waiting time in April 2021 was 2.7 weeks.

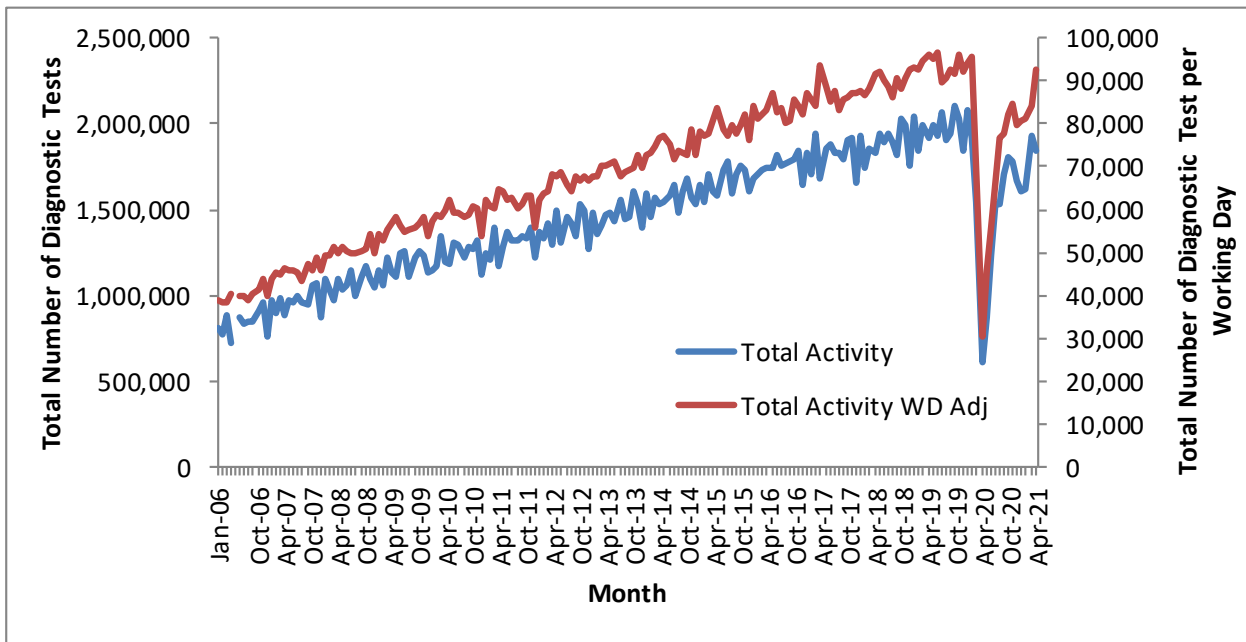
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to April 2021



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 April 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 smallest increase in activity was CT where April 2021 activity was 5.9% higher per month than April 2020 (Table 1).

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

	Apr-20	Apr-21	Average monthly growth
MRI	91,239	283,091	9.9%
CT	281,827	561,753	5.9%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	163,730	589,557	11.3%
Barium Enema	860	2,716	10.1%
Dexa Scan	1,101	33,636	33.0%
Audiology Assessments	14,948	72,899	14.1%
Echocardiography	36,026	126,886	11.1%
Electrophysiology	158	740	13.7%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	1,393	16,297	22.7%
Sleep Studies	1,530	9,447	16.4%
Urodynamics	820	5,618	17.4%
Colonoscopy	2,923	46,226	25.9%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	1,535	17,143	22.3%
Cystoscopy	6,903	25,957	11.7%
Gastroscopy	5,226	55,548	21.8%
All Tests	610,219	1,847,514	9.7%

4 April 2021 Data

This section analyses the April 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 April 2021, there were a total of 310,800 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 24.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with April 2020, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 158,100, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 31.7 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with April 2020, the test with the smallest decrease in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology, which decreased by 12.1 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Sleep Studies, which decreased by 46.0 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Apr-20	Apr-21	Difference (%age points)
MRI	55.1%	17.6%	-37.5
CT	43.4%	15.8%	-27.6
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	54.8%	16.0%	-38.8
Barium Enema	50.6%	9.6%	-41.0
Dexa Scan	60.7%	32.8%	-27.9
Audiology Assessments	61.8%	23.2%	-38.6
Echocardiography	57.9%	37.1%	-20.8
Electrophysiology	22.8%	10.7%	-12.1
Peripheral Neurophysiology	67.3%	34.9%	-32.4
Sleep Studies	66.8%	20.8%	-46.0
Urodynamics	68.9%	52.6%	-16.3
Colonoscopy	59.8%	43.0%	-16.8
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	62.2%	44.7%	-17.4
Cystoscopy	53.1%	40.6%	-12.5
Gastroscopy	63.5%	44.2%	-19.2
All Tests	55.7%	24.0%	-31.7

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with April 2020, the test type with the smallest decrease in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with a decrease of 17.4 percentage points. Physiological Measurement decreased by 27.2 percentage points, while Imaging decreased by 35.5 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

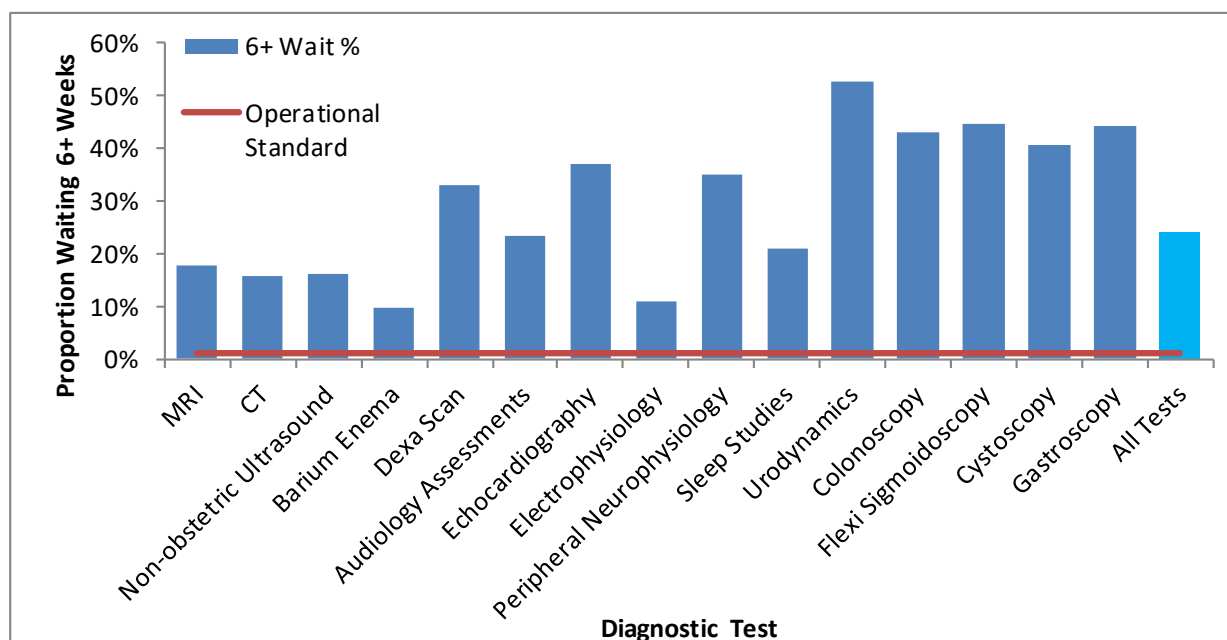
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – April 2020 and April 2021

	Apr-20	Apr-21	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	52.8%	17.3%	-35.5
Physiological Measurement	60.8%	33.7%	-27.2
Endoscopy	60.8%	43.4%	-17.4
Total	55.7%	24.0%	-31.7

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 Barium Enema (9.6%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (52.6%) (Chart 6).

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



4.1.6. 134 of the 140 acute trusts that submitted data for April 2021 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.

4.1.7. All 107 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 16.7% (London) and 31.7% (East of England) (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: April 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	33,042	16.7%	197,454	292,615	2.2
South West	32,593	26.5%	122,967	177,599	2.9
South East	29,981	17.4%	172,580	280,566	2.3
Midlands	65,142	26.4%	246,779	328,873	2.8
East of England	51,096	31.7%	161,087	206,911	3.2
North West	48,194	25.3%	190,322	262,287	2.7
North East and Yorkshire	50,238	25.2%	199,681	286,125	2.8
England	310,286	24.0%	1,290,870	1,834,976	2.7

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of April 2021 there were a total of 1,293,500 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 453,400 (53.8%) from April 2020.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 33.4% of the total waiting list, or 432,500 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.05% of the total waiting list, or 700 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – April 2020 and April 2021

	Apr-20	Apr-21	Growth (%age)
MRI	143,863	239,490	66.5%
CT	112,639	155,310	37.9%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	246,425	432,467	75.5%
Barium Enema	1,508	1,800	19.4%
Dexa Scan	29,618	47,841	61.5%
Audiology Assessments	39,963	49,480	23.8%
Echocardiography	82,860	129,605	56.4%
Electrophysiology	377	664	76.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,540	28,390	45.3%
Sleep Studies	8,240	8,747	6.2%
Urodynamics	5,065	8,334	64.5%
Colonoscopy	54,259	66,240	22.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	24,061	26,811	11.4%
Cystoscopy	15,784	22,103	40.0%
Gastroscopy	56,847	76,209	34.1%
All Tests	841,049	1,293,491	53.8%

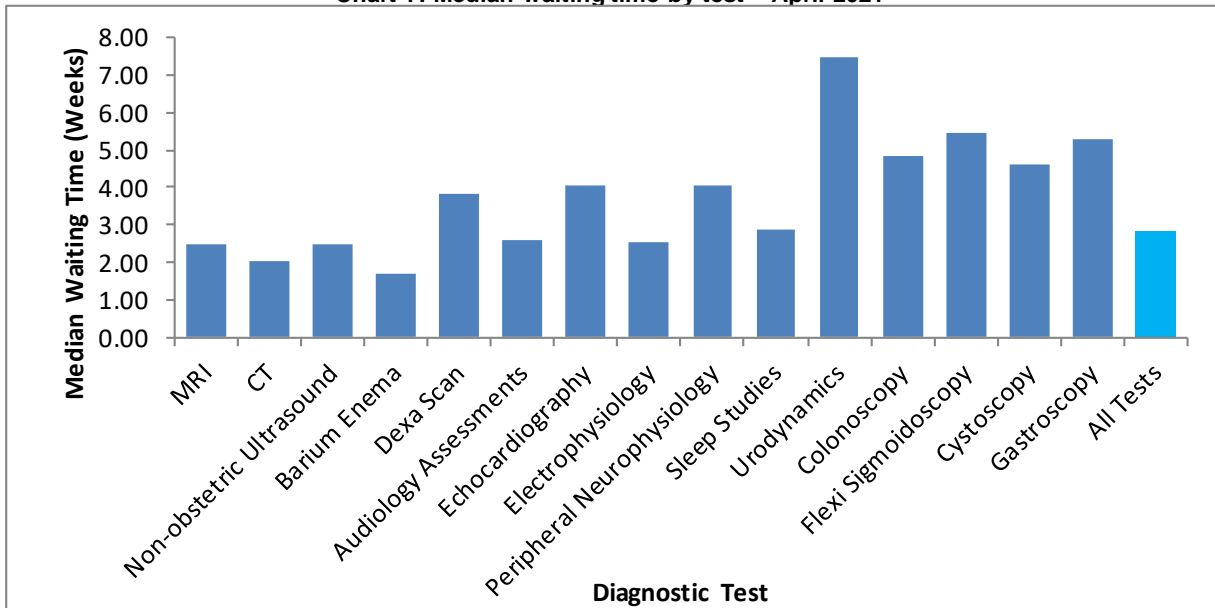
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Electrophysiology, where the waiting list grew by 76.1% compared with April 2020.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of April 2021, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.7 weeks from the time of referral, down from 2.8 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 – April 2021



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,847,500 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during April 2021. This is an increase of 1,237,295 (202.8%) from April 2020 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 589,600 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.9% of all activity in April 2021. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 700 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 12.5% from the same period last year.

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

	Apr-21	Apr-20	YTD 21/22	YTD 20/21	Growth Apr 21 vs Apr 20	Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21	Adjusted Growth Apr 21 vs Apr 20	Adjusted Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21
MRI	283,091	91,239	283,091	91,239	210.3%	210.3%	210.3%	210.3%
CT	561,753	281,827	561,753	281,827	99.3%	99.3%	99.3%	99.3%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	589,557	163,730	589,557	163,730	260.1%	260.1%	260.1%	260.1%
Barium Enema	2,716	860	2,716	860	215.8%	215.8%	215.8%	215.8%
Dexa Scan	33,636	1,101	33,636	1,101	2955.0%	2955.0%	2955.0%	2955.0%
Audiology Assessments	72,899	14,948	72,899	14,948	387.7%	387.7%	387.7%	387.7%
Echocardiography	126,886	36,026	126,886	36,026	252.2%	252.2%	252.2%	252.2%
Electrophysiology	740	158	740	158	368.4%	368.4%	368.4%	368.4%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,297	1,393	16,297	1,393	1069.9%	1069.9%	1069.9%	1069.9%
Sleep Studies	9,447	1,530	9,447	1,530	517.5%	517.5%	517.5%	517.5%
Urodynamics	5,618	820	5,618	820	585.1%	585.1%	585.1%	585.1%
Colonoscopy	46,226	2,923	46,226	2,923	1481.5%	1481.5%	1481.5%	1481.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,143	1,535	17,143	1,535	1016.8%	1016.8%	1016.8%	1016.8%
Cystoscopy	25,957	6,903	25,957	6,903	276.0%	276.0%	276.0%	276.0%
Gastroscopy	55,548	5,226	55,548	5,226	962.9%	962.9%	962.9%	962.9%
All Tests	1,847,514	610,219	1,847,514	610,219	202.8%	202.8%	202.8%	202.8%

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

5 Revisions

- 5.1. Data has been revised for the months September 2019 to December 2020. This covered a total of 188 revisions from 35 organisations. The amendments have generally had a small impact on the national data (see Table 7).

Table 7: Revisions published on 10th June 2021

Period	Total Activity			Total Waiting List			Total 6+ week waits		
	Original	Revised	Change	Original	Revised	Change	Original	Revised	Change
Sep-19	1,944,963	1,947,391	2,428	1,022,970	1,023,211	241	38,750	38,802	52
Oct-19	2,103,491	2,106,814	3,323	1,071,760	1,074,488	2,728	33,178	34,812	1,634
Nov-19	2,021,326	2,023,314	1,988	1,059,904	1,059,254	-650	31,104	31,395	291
Dec-19	1,842,722	1,845,982	3,260	1,005,349	1,004,652	-697	41,906	42,116	210
Jan-20	2,080,012	2,075,061	- 4,951	1,045,451	1,045,404	-47	46,157	46,319	162
Feb-20	1,911,462	1,912,658	1,196	1,081,921	1,082,022	101	29,832	29,945	113
Mar-20	1,520,740	1,538,327	17,587	838,569	841,707	3,138	85,446	85,749	303
Apr-20	612,232	610,219	- 2,013	840,713	841,049	336	468,622	468,864	242
May-20	873,853	873,116	- 737	977,491	979,650	2,159	571,459	572,615	1,156
Jun-20	1,224,873	1,226,660	1,787	1,130,380	1,129,279	-1,101	540,593	539,433	-1,160
Jul-20	1,531,081	1,527,908	- 3,173	1,236,628	1,236,943	315	489,647	489,797	150
Aug-20	1,532,643	1,530,366	- 2,277	1,241,095	1,241,753	658	472,088	472,517	429
Sep-20	1,711,108	1,707,686	- 3,422	1,272,282	1,271,102	-1,180	420,445	419,841	-604
Oct-20	1,803,487	1,802,302	- 1,185	1,239,114	1,240,021	907	362,084	362,367	283
Nov-20	1,778,273	1,775,221	- 3,052	1,200,252	1,199,875	-377	330,346	330,179	-167
Dec-20	1,678,322	1,672,790	- 5,532	1,185,133	1,184,075	-1,058	345,664	345,923	259

- 5.2. These revisions have had minimal impact on the national proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more or the median waiting times for each of these sixteen months.

6 Annex

6.1 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](#).

6.2 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 June 2021 for the months September 2019 through to December 2020.

6.3 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](#).

6.4 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.

6.5 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](#).

6.6 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>

6.7 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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