

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



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May 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 May 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 May 2021 was 297,500. This was 22.3% 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 May 2020 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 275,100 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 36.2 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 22.3% (May 2021) and 47.8% (June 2020).
- At the end of May 2021, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 7.3%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 48.0% 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 2.9 weeks at the end of May 2021.
- There were 1,333,900 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of May 2021. This is an increase of 354,300 from May 2020. In the last 12 months the total number of patients waiting for a diagnostic test has increased, further to the reduction in March 2020 as a result of COVID-19 followed by growth in the waiting list and some subsequent reductions.
- A total of 1,889,600 diagnostic tests were undertaken in May 2021. This is an increase of 1,016,500 from May 2020. Monthly activity was increasing slightly until it fell sharply from March 2020 before services started to resume from May 2020 onwards.

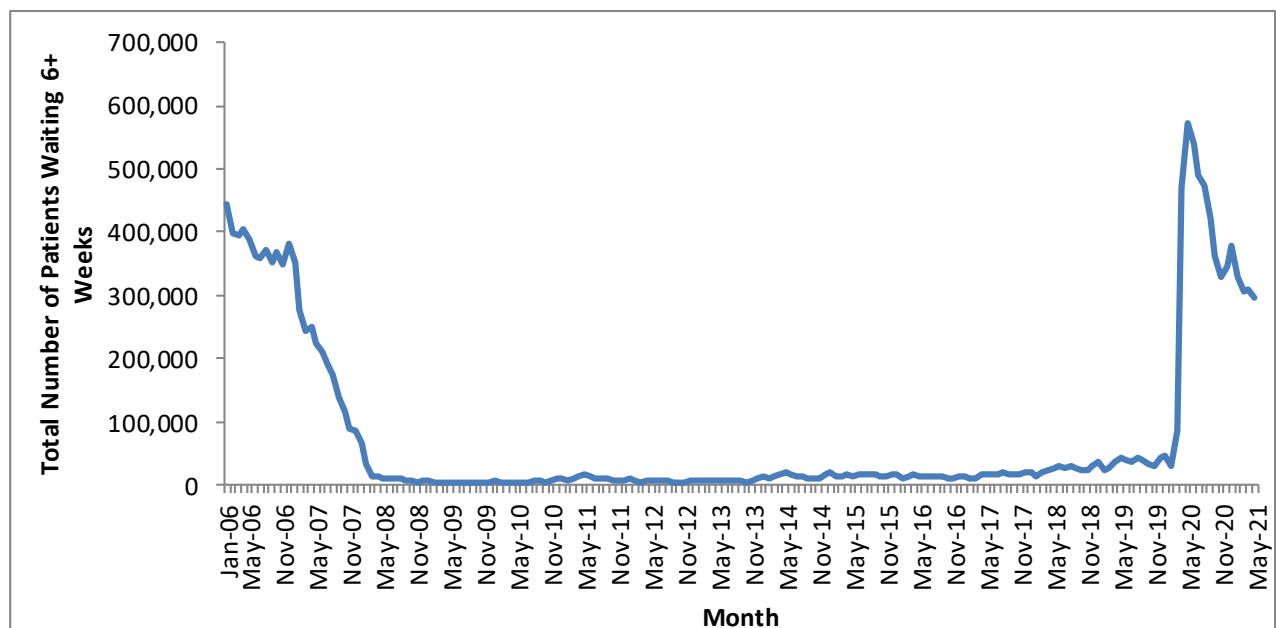
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

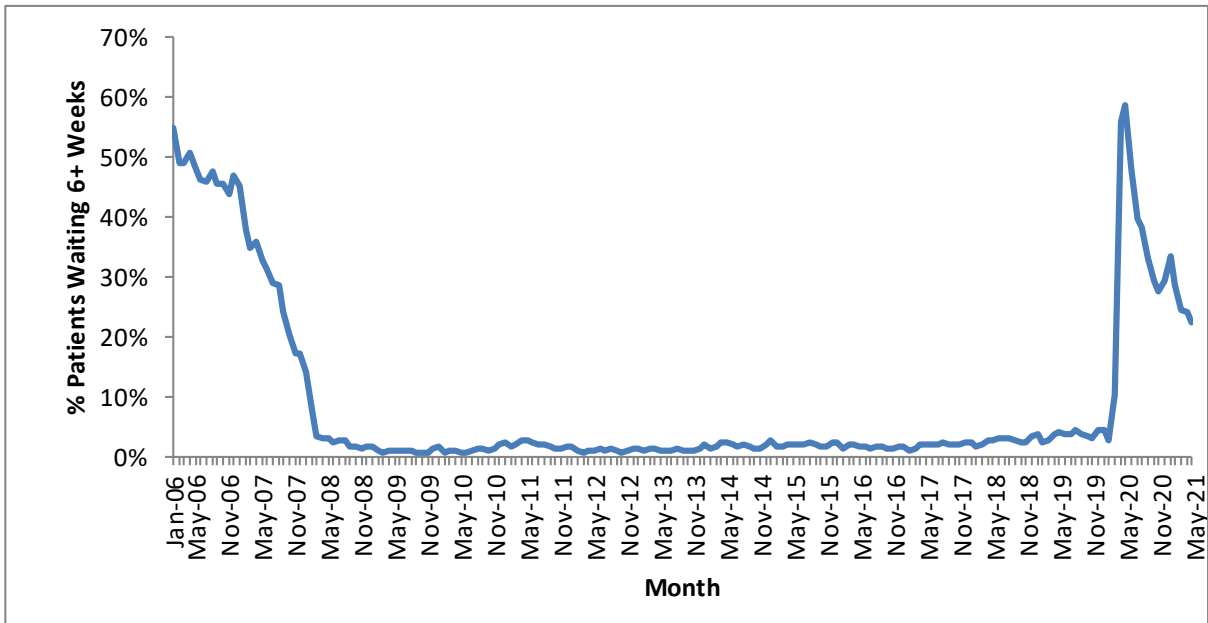
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 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 May 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In May 2021 there was a decrease of 13,300 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to May 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 22.3% (May 2021) and 47.8% (June 2020). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

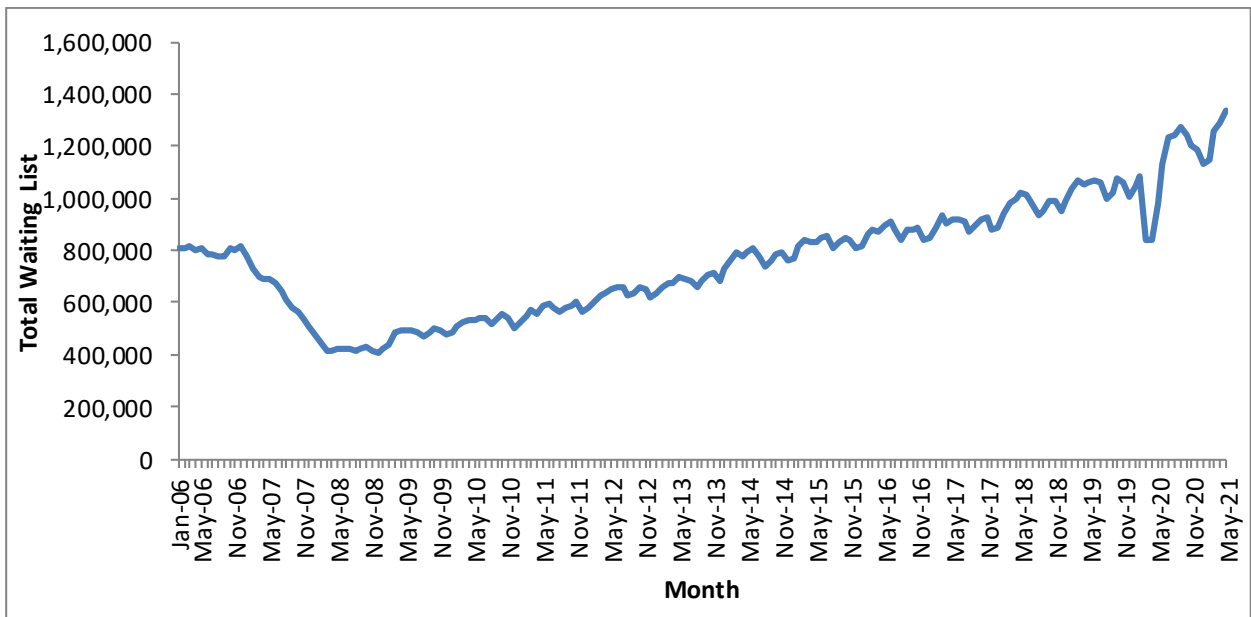
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to May 2021**



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.

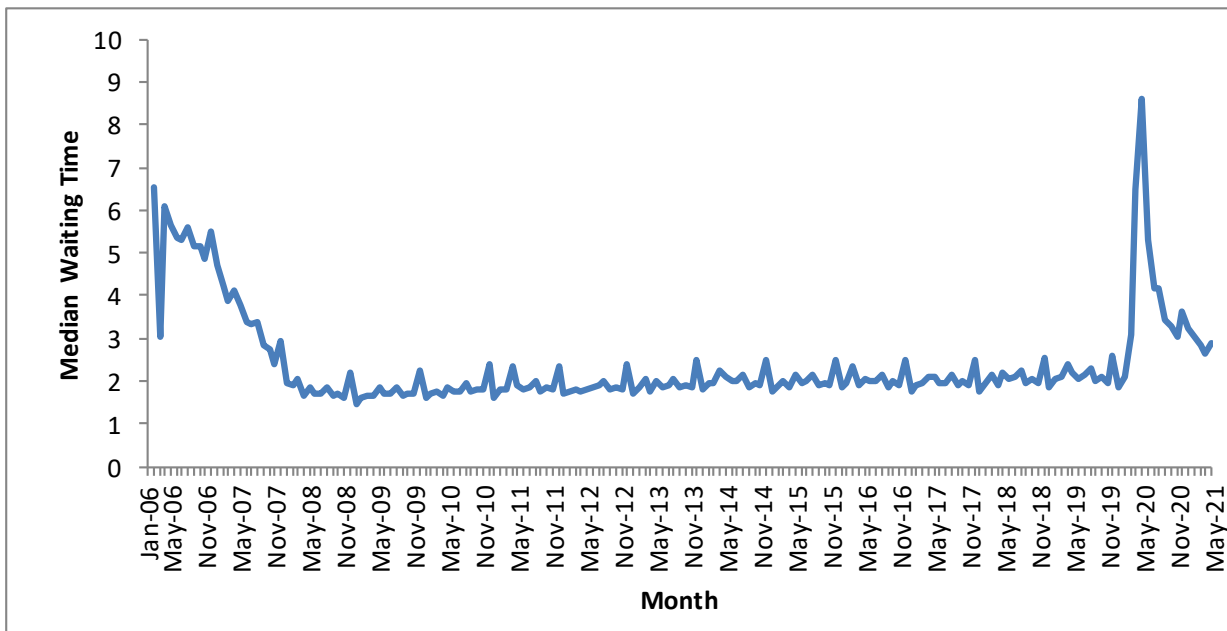
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to May 2021**



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 5.3 weeks (June 2020) and a low of 2.7 weeks (April 2021). The median waiting time in May 2021 was 2.9 weeks.

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

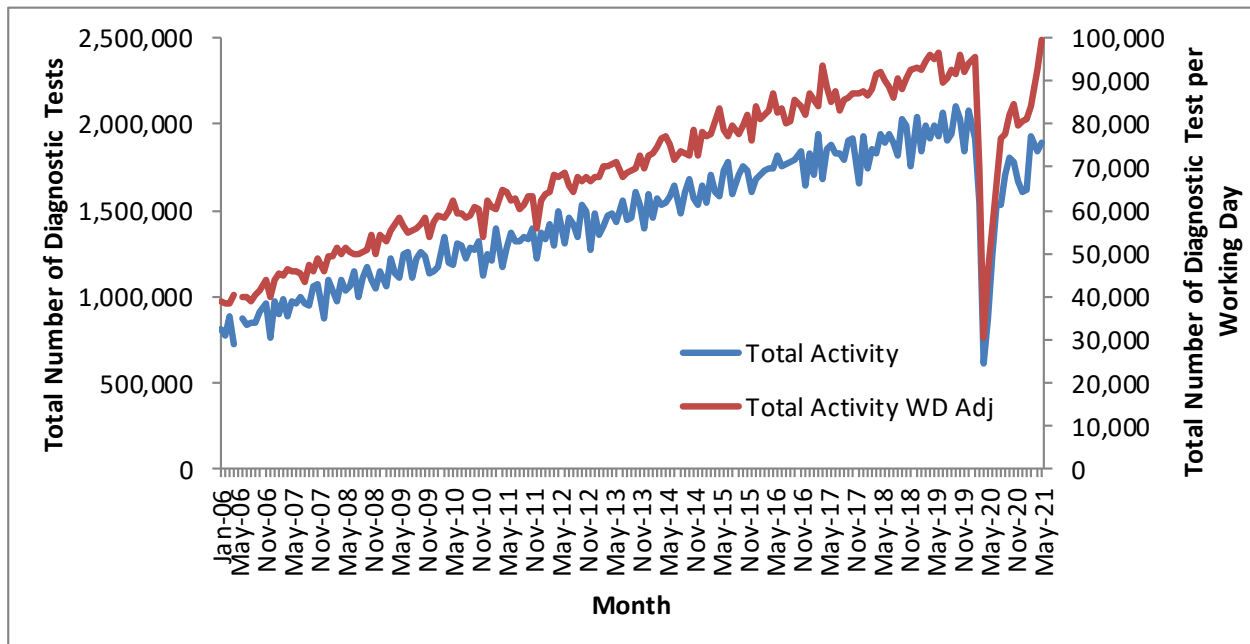


3.4 Total Activity

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 May 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 May 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 May 2021 activity was 3.6% higher per month than May 2020 (Table 1).

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

	May-20	May-21	Average monthly growth
MRI	136,800	295,746	6.6%
CT	381,442	579,968	3.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	244,764	590,341	7.6%
Barium Enema	1,483	3,105	6.4%
Dexa Scan	3,390	33,477	21.0%
Audiology Assessments	15,812	74,755	13.8%
Echocardiography	52,572	127,231	7.6%
Electrophysiology	212	752	11.1%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	3,137	16,995	15.1%
Sleep Studies	2,108	9,176	13.0%
Urodynamics	1,011	5,664	15.4%
Colonoscopy	7,411	49,780	17.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	3,622	17,769	14.2%
Cystoscopy	9,528	26,387	8.9%
Gastroscopy	9,824	58,421	16.0%
All Tests	873,116	1,889,567	6.6%

4 May 2021 Data

This section analyses the May 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 May 2021, there were a total of 297,500 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 22.3% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with May 2020, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 275,100, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 36.2 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with May 2020, the test with the smallest decrease in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Cystoscopy, which decreased by 17.8 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Audiology Assessment, which decreased by 59.0 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	May-20	May-21	Difference (%age points)
MRI	54.5%	16.9%	-37.7
CT	44.7%	14.7%	-30.0
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	54.5%	14.9%	-39.6
Barium Enema	50.1%	7.3%	-42.7
Dexa Scan	67.8%	29.6%	-38.2
Audiology Assessments	79.5%	20.5%	-59.0
Echocardiography	61.6%	34.7%	-26.9
Electrophysiology	51.1%	7.5%	-43.6
Peripheral Neurophysiology	72.7%	31.8%	-40.9
Sleep Studies	71.7%	16.6%	-55.1
Urodynamics	72.0%	48.0%	-24.0
Colonoscopy	66.5%	41.1%	-25.5
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	67.4%	42.0%	-25.3
Cystoscopy	55.9%	38.1%	-17.8
Gastroscopy	68.8%	41.4%	-27.4
All Tests	58.5%	22.3%	-36.2

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with May 2020, the test type with the smallest decrease in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with a decrease of 25.4 percentage points. Physiological Measurement decreased by 37.7 percentage points, while Imaging decreased by 37.0 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

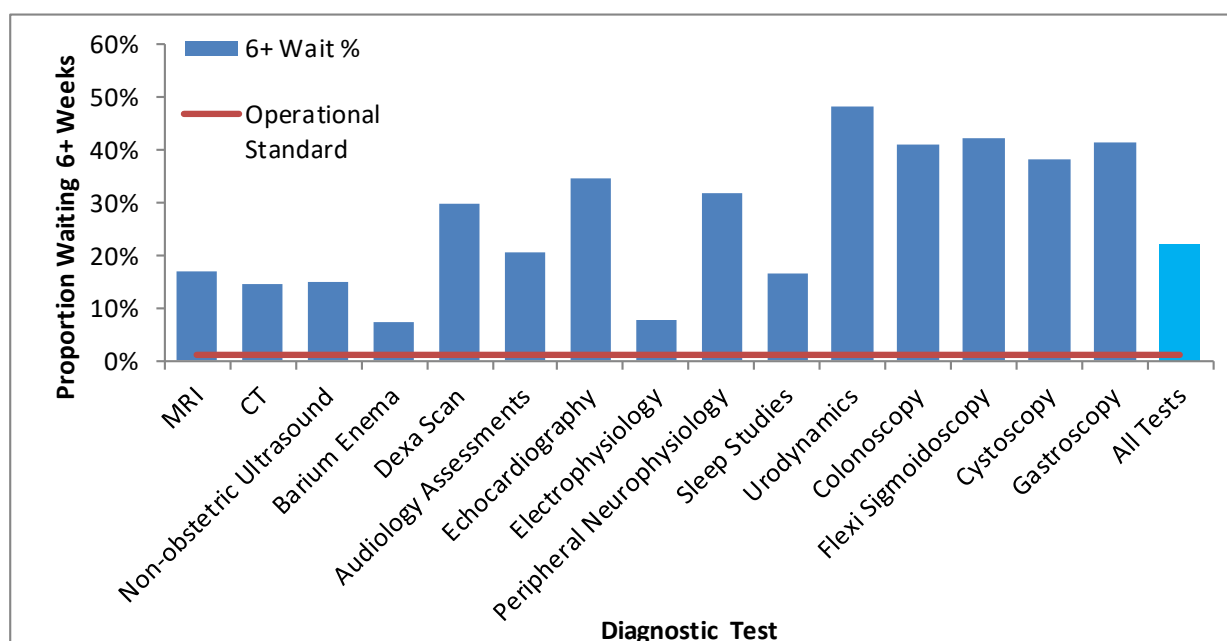
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – May 2020 and May 2021

	May-20	May-21	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	53.2%	16.3%	-37.0
Physiological Measurement	68.4%	30.8%	-37.7
Endoscopy	66.4%	41.0%	-25.4
Total	58.5%	22.3%	-36.2

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 (7.3%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (48.0%) (Chart 6).

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



4.1.6. 132 of the 140 acute trusts that submitted data for May 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 15.7% (London) and 30.0% (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: May 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	32,418	15.7%	207,073	304,972	2.5
South West	31,552	24.6%	128,494	177,522	3.1
South East	28,851	15.9%	181,276	293,303	2.5
Midlands	61,620	24.0%	256,954	341,242	3.0
East of England	50,280	30.0%	167,763	210,029	3.4
North West	43,426	23.4%	185,264	257,019	3.0
North East and Yorkshire	48,883	23.9%	204,620	292,214	3.0
England	297,471	22.3%	1,333,921	1,889,567	2.9

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

4.2.1. At the end of May 2021 there were a total of 1,333,900 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 354,300 (36.2%) from May 2020.

4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 33.1% of the total waiting list, or 441,200 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.06% of the total waiting list, or 700 patients (Table 5).

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

	May-20	May-21	Growth (%age)
MRI	161,229	255,641	58.6%
CT	130,284	158,008	21.3%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	288,852	441,219	52.7%
Barium Enema	1,814	1,757	-3.1%
Dexa Scan	36,145	52,116	44.2%
Audiology Assessments	44,293	53,844	21.6%
Echocardiography	92,967	137,174	47.6%
Electrophysiology	1,076	748	-30.5%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	25,485	30,364	19.1%
Sleep Studies	10,294	9,719	-5.6%
Urodynamics	6,057	8,055	33.0%
Colonoscopy	64,956	63,855	-1.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	28,883	25,406	-12.0%
Cystoscopy	19,166	22,064	15.1%
Gastroscopy	68,149	73,951	8.5%
All Tests	979,650	1,333,921	36.2%

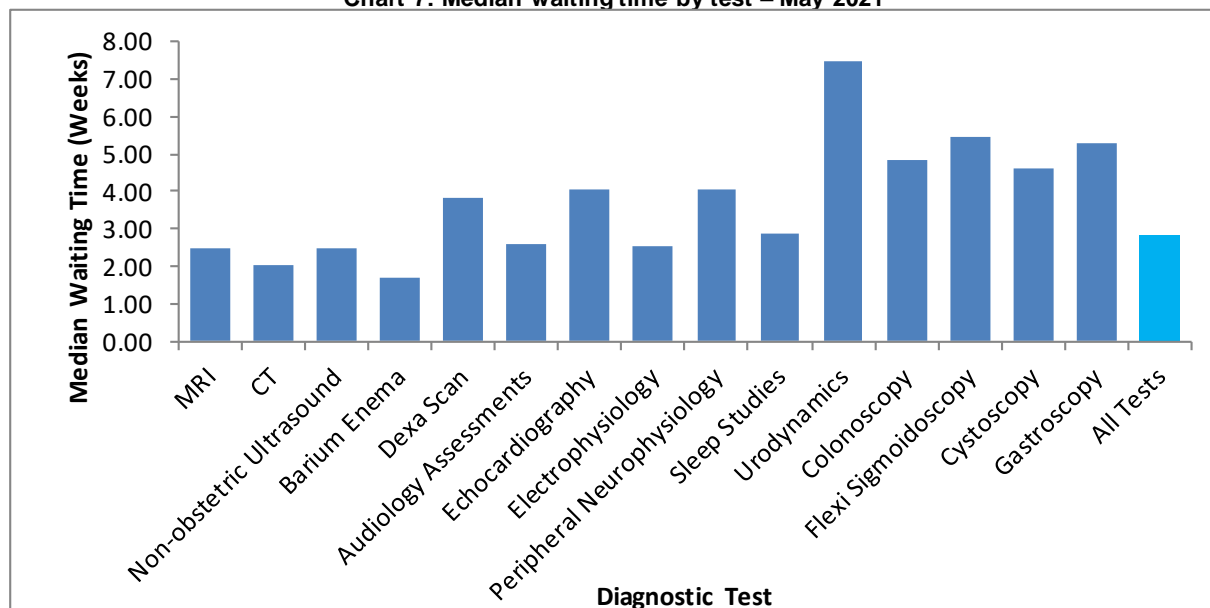
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for MRI, where the waiting list grew by 58.6% compared with May 2020.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of May 2021, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.9 weeks from the time of referral, up from 2.7 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 1.9 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 5.7 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – May 2021



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 1,889,600 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during May 2021. This is an increase of 1,016,451 (116%) from May 2020 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 590,300 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.2% of all activity in May 2021. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 800 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 3.7% from the same period last year.

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

	May-21	May-20	YTD 21/22	YTD 20/21	Growth May 21 vs May 20	Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21	Adjusted Growth May 21 vs May 20	Adjusted Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21
MRI	295,746	136,800	578,837	228,039	116.2%	153.8%	116.2%	153.8%
CT	579,968	381,442	1,141,721	663,269	52.0%	72.1%	52.0%	72.1%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	590,341	244,764	1,179,898	408,494	141.2%	188.8%	141.2%	188.8%
Barium Enema	3,105	1,483	5,821	2,343	109.4%	148.4%	109.4%	148.4%
Dexa Scan	33,477	3,390	67,113	4,491	887.5%	1394.4%	887.5%	1394.4%
Audiology Assessments	74,755	15,812	147,654	30,760	372.8%	380.0%	372.8%	380.0%
Echocardiography	127,231	52,572	254,117	88,598	142.0%	186.8%	142.0%	186.8%
Electrophysiology	752	212	1,492	370	254.7%	303.2%	254.7%	303.2%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,995	3,137	33,292	4,530	441.8%	634.9%	441.8%	634.9%
Sleep Studies	9,176	2,108	18,623	3,638	335.3%	411.9%	335.3%	411.9%
Urodynamics	5,664	1,011	11,282	1,831	460.2%	516.2%	460.2%	516.2%
Colonoscopy	49,780	7,411	96,006	10,334	571.7%	829.0%	571.7%	829.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,769	3,622	34,912	5,157	390.6%	577.0%	390.6%	577.0%
Cystoscopy	26,387	9,528	52,344	16,431	176.9%	218.6%	176.9%	218.6%
Gastroscopy	58,421	9,824	113,969	15,050	494.7%	657.3%	494.7%	657.3%
All Tests	1,889,567	873,116	3,737,081	1,483,335	116.4%	151.9%	116.4%	151.9%

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

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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