

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

March 2022 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 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 2022 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to affect the current reporting period and comparisons with the previous year.
- 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 2022 was 389,900. This was 24.8% 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 2021 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 84,800 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 0.6 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 30.0% (January 2022).
- At the end of March 2022, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 4.4%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 48.1% 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 3.1 weeks at the end of March 2022.
- There were 1,568,500 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of March 2022. This is an increase of 313,000 from March 2021.
- A total of 2,079,300 diagnostic tests were undertaken in March 2022. This is an increase of 145,700 from March 2021.

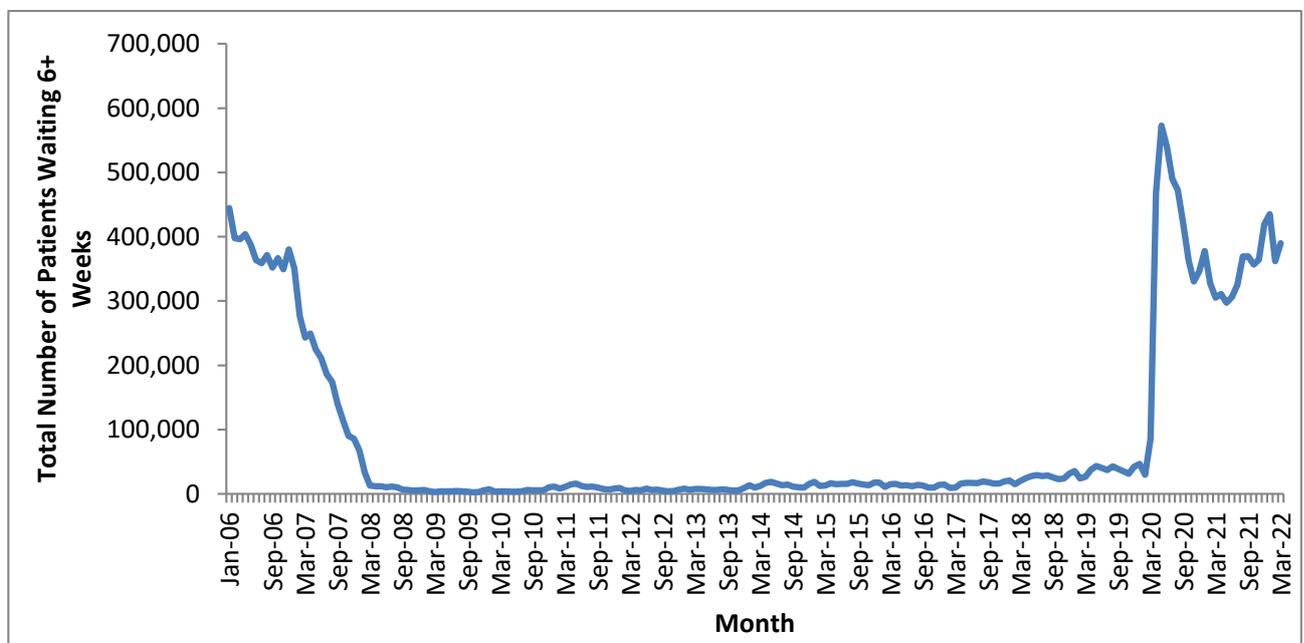
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

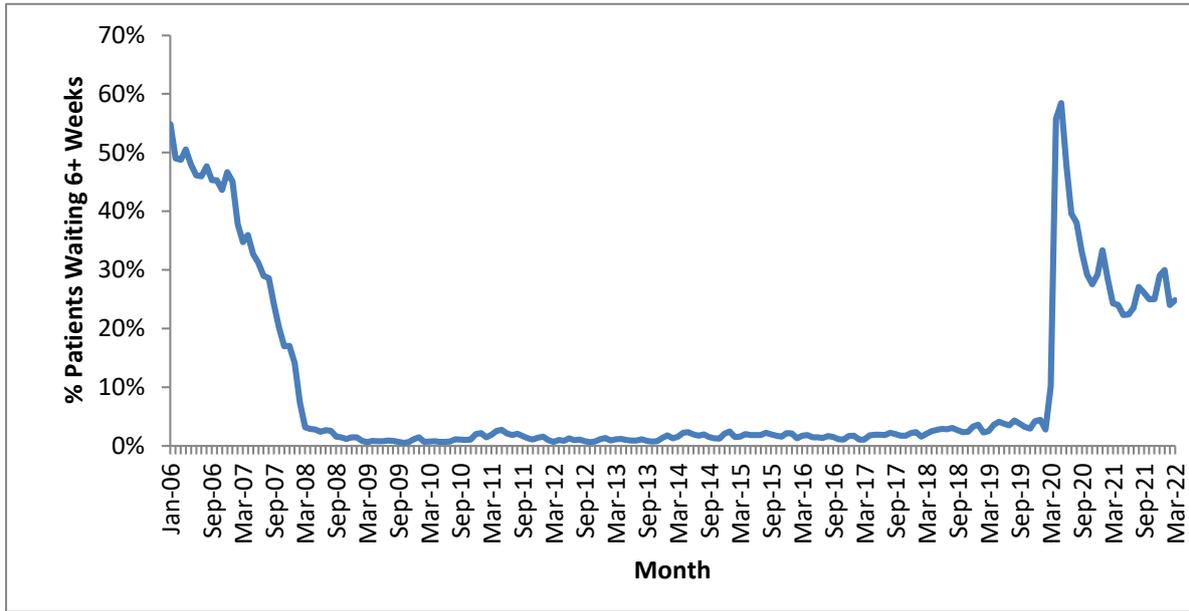
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 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 2022 there was an increase of 27,800 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 2022



- 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 30.0% (January 2022). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

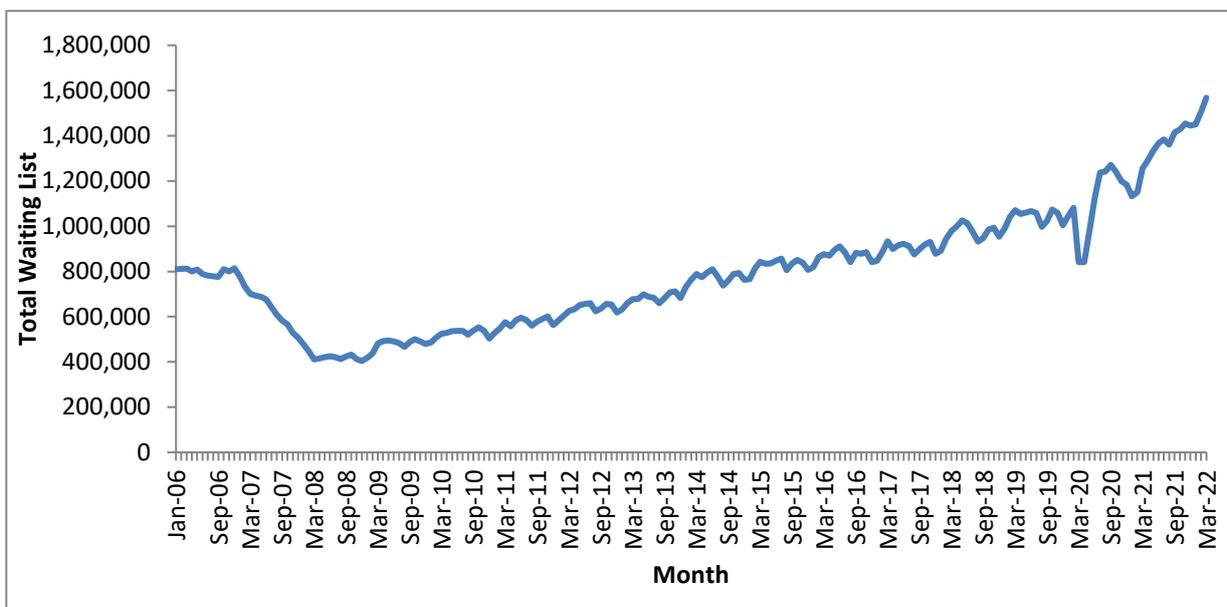
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2022**



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.

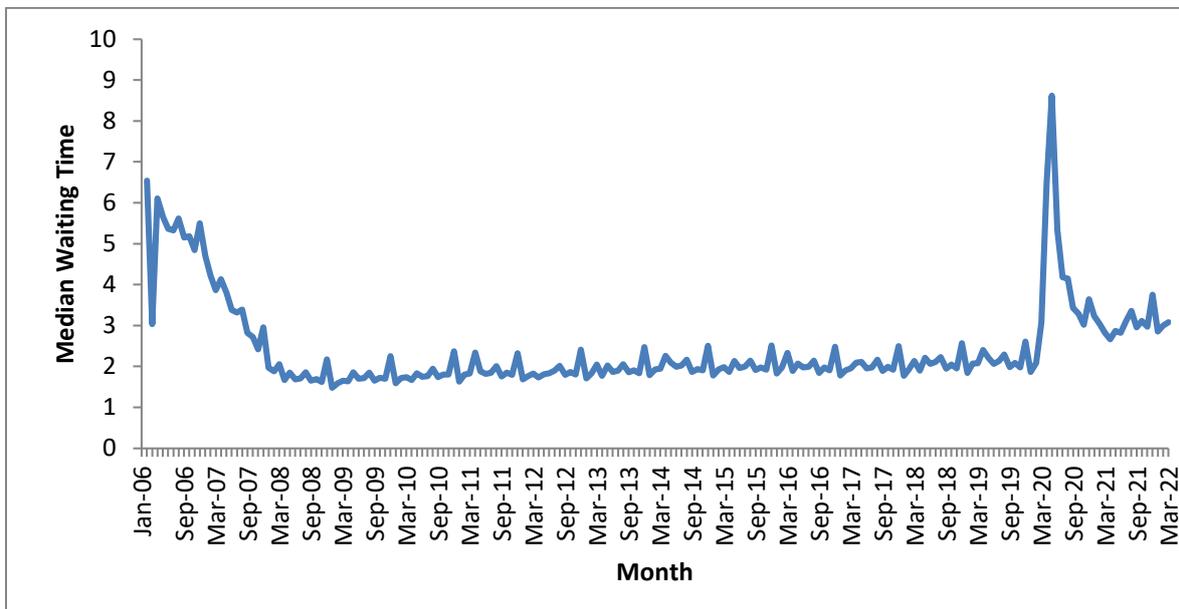
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2022**



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 3.8 weeks (December 2021) and a low of 2.7 weeks (April 2021). The median waiting time in March 2022 was 3.1 weeks.

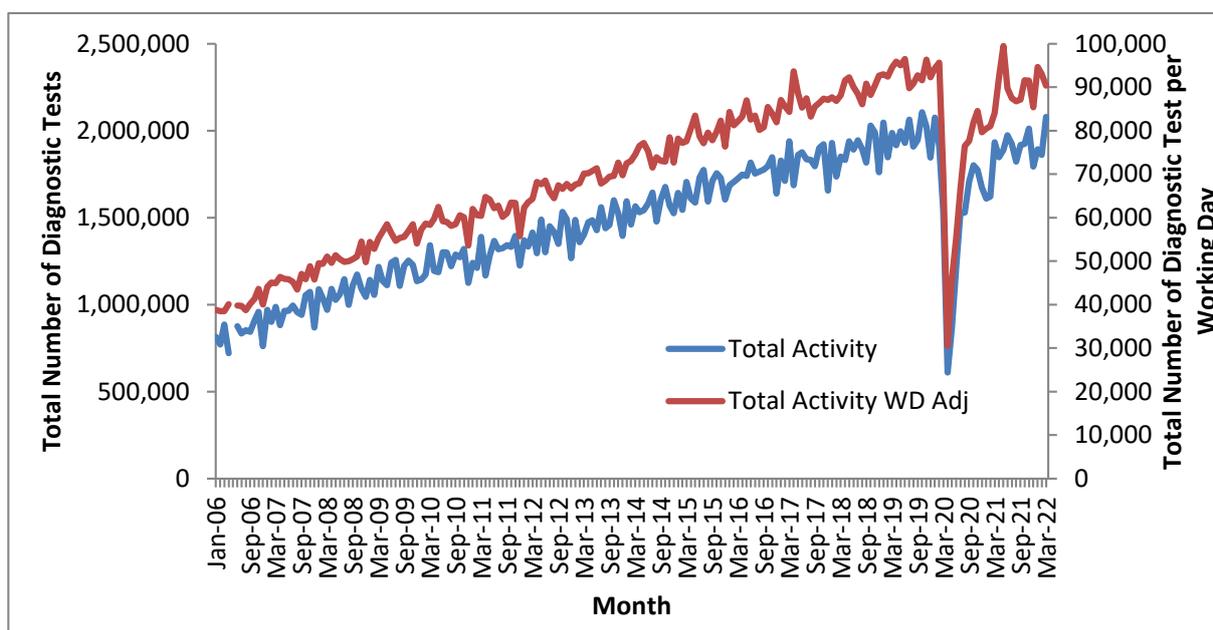
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to March 2022



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 with some further set-backs.

**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to March 2022**



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 decrease in activity was Electrophysiology where March 2022 activity was 1% lower per month than March 2021 (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – March 2021 and March 2022

	Mar-21	Mar-22	Average monthly growth
MRI	302,986	329,448	0.7%
CT	579,815	620,891	0.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	621,740	651,809	0.4%
Barium Enema	2,786	3,227	1.2%
Dexa Scan	32,187	40,187	1.9%
Audiology Assessments	73,930	91,435	1.8%
Echocardiography	132,052	143,404	0.7%
Electrophysiology	933	828	-1.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	16,434	20,123	1.7%
Sleep Studies	8,880	11,386	2.1%
Urodynamics	4,883	5,549	1.1%
Colonoscopy	50,821	52,110	0.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,601	18,191	-0.2%
Cystoscopy	27,793	29,249	0.4%
Gastroscopy	59,712	61,425	0.2%
All Tests	1,933,553	2,079,262	0.6%

4 March 2022 Data

This section analyses the March 2022 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 2020.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of March 2022, there were a total of 389,800 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 24.8% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with March 2021, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 84,800, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 0.6 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with March 2021, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology, which increased by 25.8 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Peripheral Neurophysiology, which decreased by 15.0 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2021 and March 2022

	Mar-21	Mar-22	Difference (%age points)
MRI	17.0%	22.7%	5.7
CT	16.0%	18.7%	2.7
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	15.4%	18.6%	3.2
Barium Enema	9.9%	4.4%	-5.6
Dexa Scan	36.2%	31.7%	-4.5
Audiology Assessments	23.7%	25.0%	1.3
Echocardiography	37.2%	41.1%	3.9
Electrophysiology	8.5%	34.3%	25.8
Peripheral Neurophysiology	36.1%	21.1%	-15.0
Sleep Studies	24.4%	32.2%	7.8
Urodynamics	54.8%	48.1%	-6.8
Colonoscopy	45.1%	35.6%	-9.6
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	47.4%	35.4%	-12.0
Cystoscopy	41.9%	32.6%	-9.3
Gastroscopy	46.8%	34.5%	-12.2
All Tests	24.3%	24.8%	0.6

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with March 2021, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Physiological Measurement with an increase of 0.6 percentage points. Imaging increased by 3.5 percentage points, while Endoscopy decreased by 10.9 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

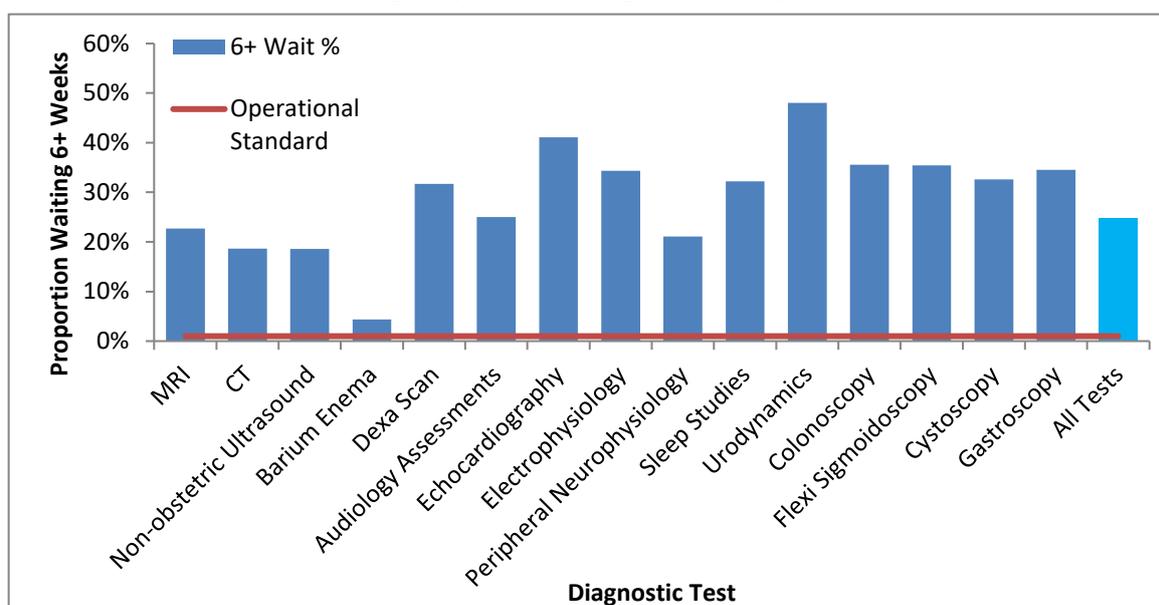
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – March 2021 and March 2022

	Mar-21	Mar-22	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	17.0%	20.5%	3.5
Physiological Measurement	34.2%	34.8%	0.6
Endoscopy	45.7%	34.8%	-10.9
Total	24.3%	24.8%	0.6

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 (4.4%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (48.1%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – March 2022



4.1.6. 135 of the 139 acute trusts that submitted data for March 2022 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 11.9% (London) and 32.4% (Midlands) (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: March 2022 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	25,079	11.9%	210,232	345,690	2.4
South West	48,040	31.7%	151,470	194,673	3.6
South East	42,096	18.6%	226,188	318,497	2.7
Midlands	109,946	32.4%	338,960	365,701	3.7
East of England	58,489	30.2%	193,626	233,249	3.6
North West	52,962	24.8%	213,729	295,982	3.0
North East and Yorkshire	52,346	22.6%	231,261	311,926	3.0
England	389,855	24.8%	1,568,914	2,079,262	3.1

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of March 2022 there were a total of 1,568,900 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 313,000 (24.9%) from March 2021.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 33.8% of the total waiting list, or 529,800 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.06% of the total waiting list, or 900 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – March 2021 and March 2022

	Mar-21	Mar-22	Growth (%age)
MRI	224,841	302,825	34.7%
CT	152,706	193,707	26.8%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	427,313	529,796	24.0%
Barium Enema	1,533	1,838	19.9%
Dexa Scan	45,161	61,747	36.7%
Audiology Assessments	46,595	79,639	70.9%
Echocardiography	123,330	167,337	35.7%
Electrophysiology	504	891	76.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	27,417	24,803	-9.5%
Sleep Studies	8,685	15,898	83.1%
Urodynamics	8,083	7,793	-3.6%
Colonoscopy	63,637	66,512	4.5%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	26,955	23,132	-14.2%
Cystoscopy	23,173	22,968	-0.9%
Gastroscopy	75,932	70,028	-7.8%
All Tests	1,255,865	1,568,914	24.9%

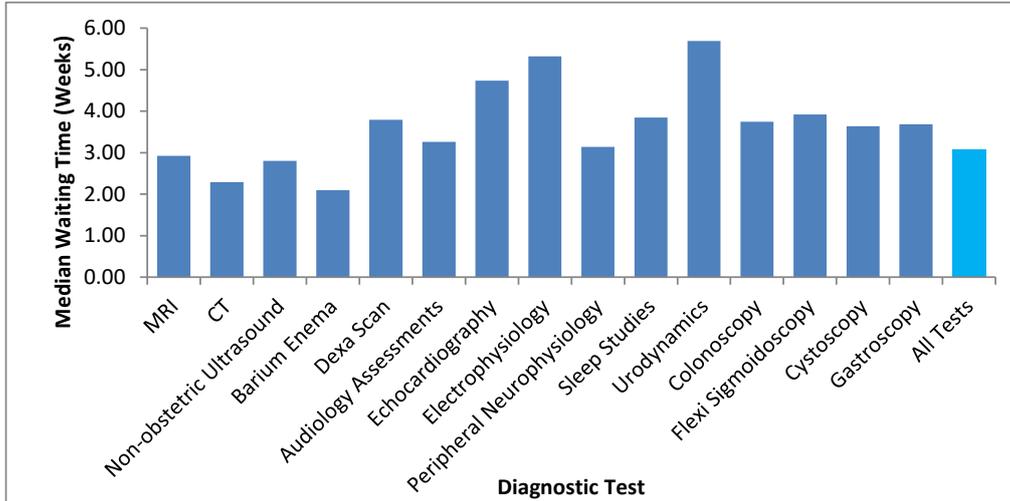
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Sleep Studies where the waiting list grew by 83.1% compared with March 2021.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of March 2022, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.1 weeks from the time of referral, up from 2.9 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 2.1 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 5.7 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – March 2022



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 2,079,300 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during March 2022. This is an increase of 145,700 (7.5%) from March 2021 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non Obstetric Ultrasound with 651,800 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.3% of all activity in March 2022. 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 increased by 28.2% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – March 2021 and March 2022

	Mar-22	Mar-21	YTD 21/22	YTD 20/21	Growth Mar 22 vs Mar 21	Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21	Adjusted Growth Mar 22 vs Mar 21	Adjusted Growth YTD 21/22 vs YTD 20/21
MRI	329,448	302,986	3,636,352	2,842,487	8.7%	27.9%	8.7%	27.9%
CT	620,891	579,815	6,971,468	5,832,060	7.1%	19.5%	7.1%	19.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	651,809	621,740	7,150,444	5,593,596	4.8%	27.8%	4.8%	27.8%
Barium Enema	3,227	2,786	36,712	28,724	15.8%	27.8%	15.8%	27.8%
Dexa Scan	40,187	32,187	441,187	270,845	24.9%	62.9%	24.9%	62.9%
Audiology Assessments	91,435	73,930	963,084	589,481	23.7%	63.4%	23.7%	63.4%
Echocardiography	143,404	132,052	1,547,699	1,222,738	8.6%	26.6%	8.6%	26.6%
Electrophysiology	828	933	9,471	6,874	-11.3%	37.8%	-11.3%	37.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,123	16,434	216,189	142,776	22.4%	51.4%	22.4%	51.4%
Sleep Studies	11,386	8,880	116,583	76,714	28.2%	52.0%	28.2%	52.0%
Urodynamics	5,549	4,883	65,972	41,930	13.6%	57.3%	13.6%	57.3%
Colonoscopy	52,110	50,821	580,849	393,118	2.5%	47.8%	2.5%	47.8%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,191	18,601	203,690	153,264	-2.2%	32.9%	-2.2%	32.9%
Cystoscopy	29,249	27,793	323,102	241,264	5.2%	33.9%	5.2%	33.9%
Gastroscopy	61,425	59,712	674,118	453,722	2.9%	48.6%	2.9%	48.6%
All Tests	2,079,262	1,933,553	22,936,920	17,889,593	7.5%	28.2%	7.5%	28.2%

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

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 March 2022 for the months September 2019 through to March 2021.

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

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