

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

November 2022 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 2022/23.

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 November 2022 Key Findings

- Diagnostic test activity and waiting times were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continues to affect the current reporting period and comparisons with previous years.
- The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests at the end of November 2022 was 428,000. This was 26.9% 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 November 2021 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 63,900 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 1.8 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% (February 2022) and 30.5% (August 2022).
- At the end of November 2022, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 3.8%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 44.8% 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 3.0 weeks at the end of November 2022.
- There were 1,593,000 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of November 2022. This is an increase of 138,000 from November 2021.
- A total of 2,172,200 diagnostic tests were undertaken in November 2022. This is an increase of 154,600 from November 2021.

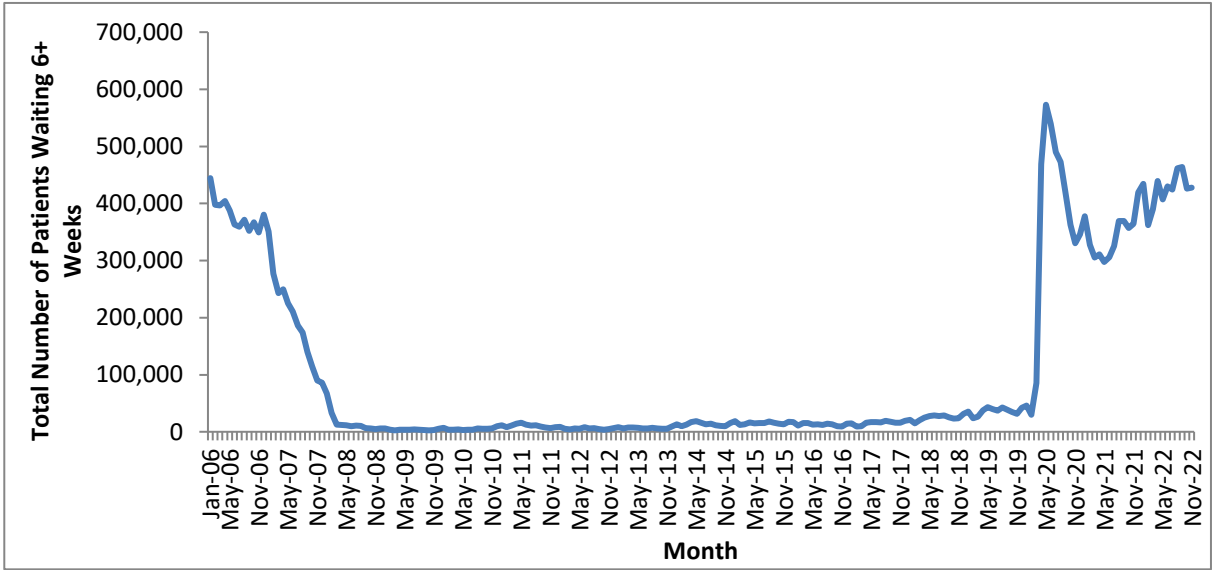
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

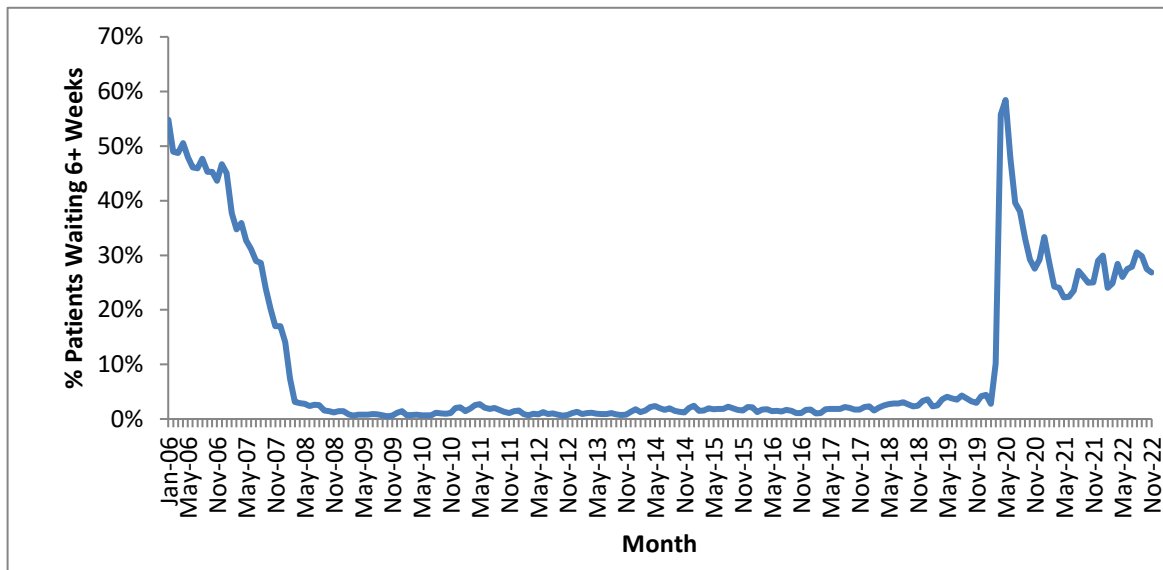
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008.
- 3.1.2. Since March 2008 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 November 2022 there was an increase of 2,000 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 November 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 24.0% (February 2021) and 30.5% (August 2022). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

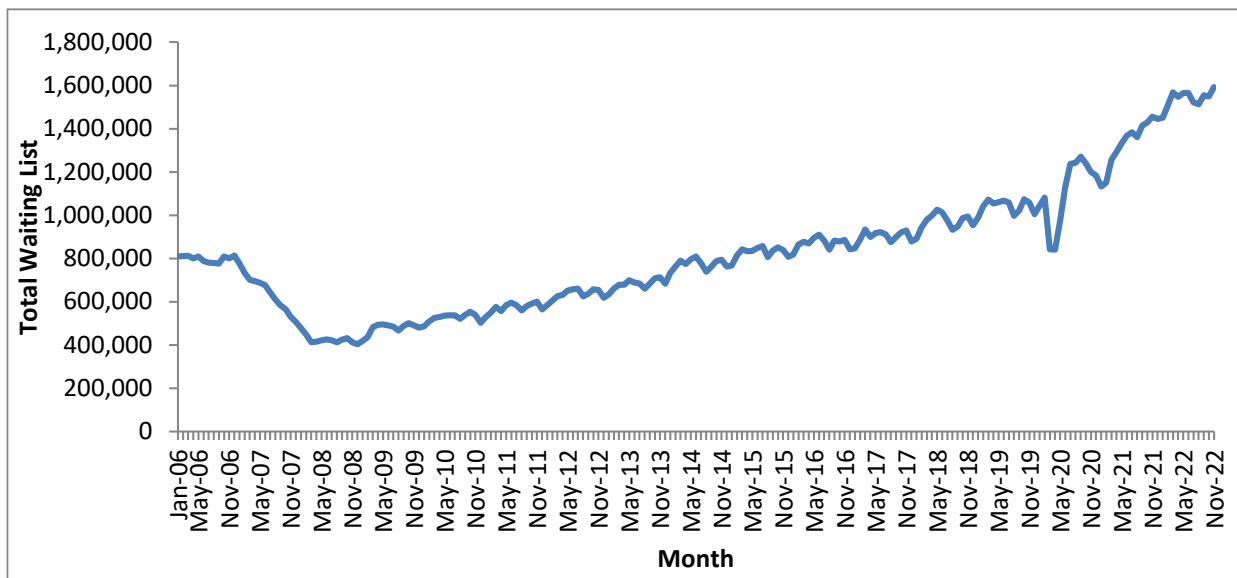
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to November 2022**



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.

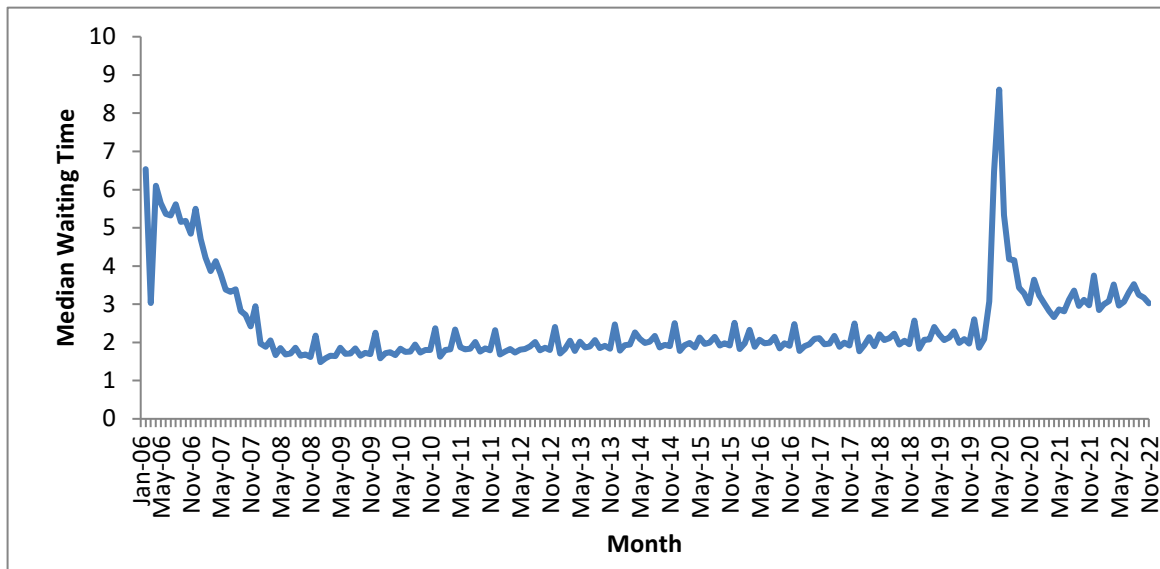
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to November 2022**



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 2.8 weeks (January 2022). The median waiting time in November 2022 was 3.0 weeks.

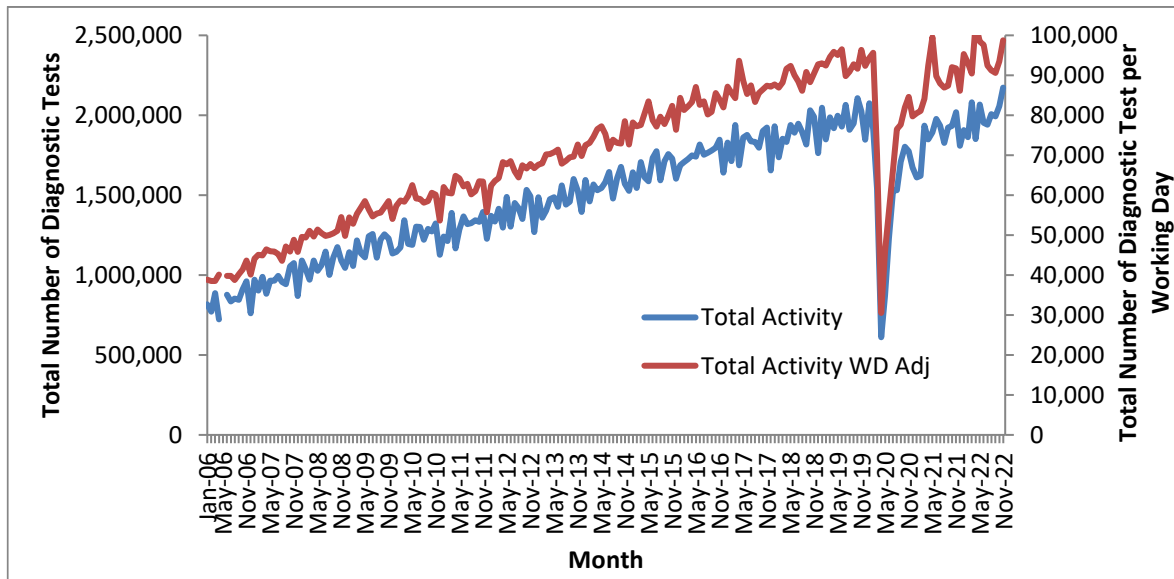
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to November 2022



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 November 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 increase in activity was Sleep Studies, where November 2022 activity was 1.5% higher per month than November 2021 (Table 1).

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

	Nov-21	Nov-22	Average monthly growth
MRI	314,916	339,740	0.6%
CT	592,698	644,791	0.7%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	643,609	689,773	0.6%
Barium Enema	3,140	3,290	0.4%
Dexa Scan	40,807	45,397	0.9%
Audiology Assessments	89,668	94,688	0.5%
Echocardiography	136,742	153,205	1.0%
Electrophysiology	1,570	386	-11.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,932	19,981	0.0%
Sleep Studies	10,539	12,596	1.5%
Urodynamics	6,171	5,788	-0.5%
Colonoscopy	52,439	56,857	0.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,291	18,202	0.0%
Cystoscopy	28,096	27,846	-0.1%
Gastroscopy	58,923	59,610	0.1%
All Tests	2,017,541	2,172,150	0.6%

4 November 2022 Data

This section analyses the November 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 November 2022, there were a total of 428,000 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 26.9% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with November 2021, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 63,900, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 1.8 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with November 2021, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology, which increased by 12.6 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Peripheral Neurophysiology, which decreased by 6.9 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Nov-21	Nov-22	Difference (%age points)
MRI	22.8%	20.8%	-2.1
CT	19.4%	14.1%	-5.3
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	18.9%	24.9%	6.1
Barium Enema	7.2%	3.8%	-3.5
Dexa Scan	29.9%	34.6%	4.7
Audiology Assessments	22.1%	31.8%	9.8
Echocardiography	41.9%	41.4%	-0.5
Electrophysiology	8.9%	21.5%	12.6
Peripheral Neurophysiology	25.1%	18.2%	-6.9
Sleep Studies	27.0%	34.1%	7.2
Urodynamics	46.6%	44.8%	-1.7
Colonoscopy	38.1%	40.0%	1.9
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	36.3%	39.4%	3.1
Cystoscopy	31.5%	33.3%	1.8
Gastroscopy	35.7%	33.6%	-2.1
All Tests	25.0%	26.9%	1.8

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with November 2021, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Endoscopy with an increase of 0.8 percentage points. Physiological Measurement increased by

1.9 percentage points, while Imaging increased by 1.8 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

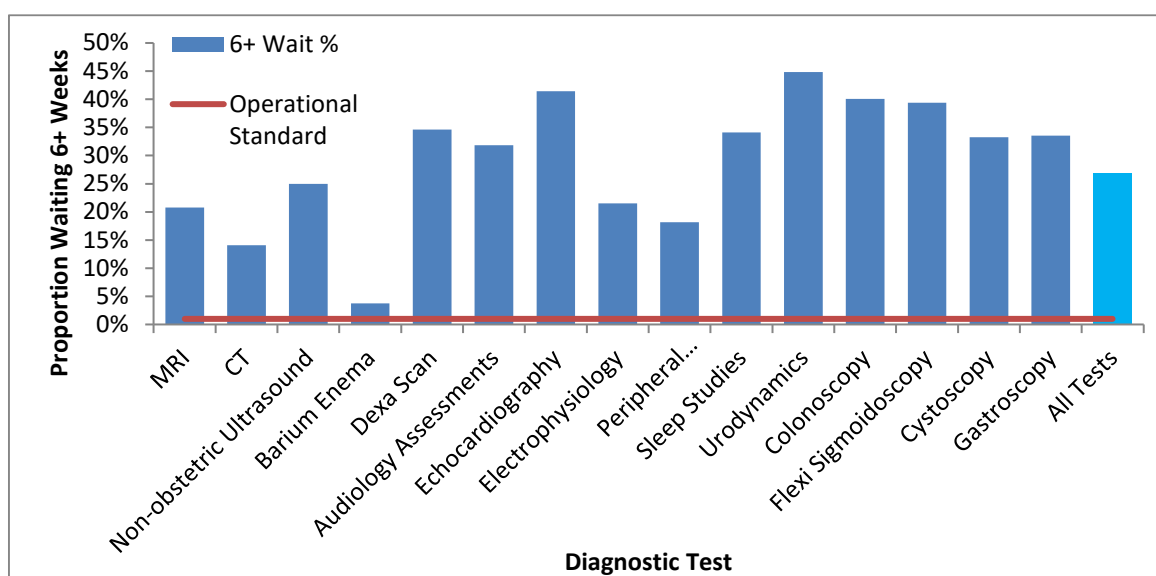
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – November 2021 and November 2022

	Nov-21	Nov-22	Difference (percentage points)
Imaging	20.7%	22.5%	1.8
Physiological Measurement	34.3%	36.2%	1.9
Endoscopy	36.2%	37.0%	0.8
Total	25.0%	26.9%	1.8

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 (3.8%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (44.8%) (Chart 6).

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



- 4.1.6. 130 of the 136 acute trusts that submitted data for November 2022 failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.7. All 42 Commissioners (ICBs) failed to meet the 1% operational standard.
- 4.1.8. None of the seven NHS England Regional Teams met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 12.8% (London) and 36.9% (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: November 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	29,086	12.8%	226,972	358,221	2.3
South West	52,640	32.6%	161,456	214,918	3.5
South East	63,642	26.1%	243,392	342,133	3.0
Midlands	139,111	36.9%	377,379	394,151	3.9
East of England	58,788	30.4%	193,563	243,467	3.4
North West	36,772	22.7%	162,065	271,192	2.7
North East and Yorkshire	47,254	21.0%	224,883	332,553	2.7
England	427,968	26.9%	1,593,025	2,172,150	3.0

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

4.2.1. At the end of November 2022 there were a total of 1,593,000 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 138,000 (9.5%) from November 2021.

4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 34.8% of the total waiting list, or 554,800 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.05% of the total waiting list, or 800 patients (Table 5).

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

	Nov-21	Nov-22	Growth (%age)
MRI	295,358	302,919	2.6%
CT	186,264	179,527	-3.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	477,811	554,816	16.1%
Barium Enema	1,745	1,730	-0.9%
Dexa Scan	55,259	62,003	12.2%
Audiology Assessments	69,268	83,582	20.7%
Echocardiography	146,166	153,866	5.3%
Electrophysiology	1,006	762	-24.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	26,327	24,978	-5.1%
Sleep Studies	13,111	21,841	66.6%
Urodynamics	7,545	8,337	10.5%
Colonoscopy	66,157	82,013	24.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	22,129	27,538	24.4%
Cystoscopy	20,824	22,707	9.0%
Gastroscopy	66,042	66,406	0.6%
All Tests	1,455,012	1,593,025	9.5%

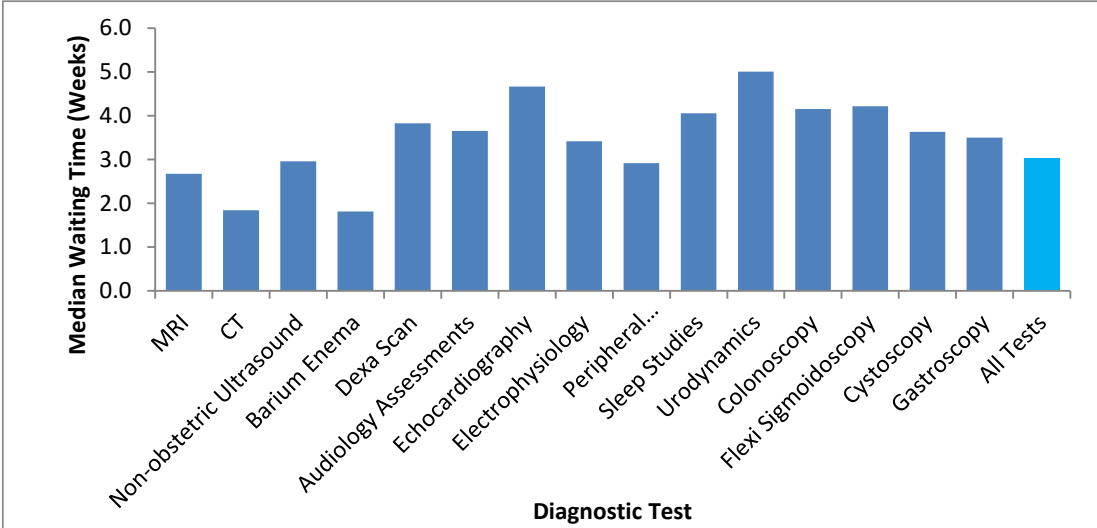
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

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 66.6% compared with November 2021.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of November 2022, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.0 weeks from the time of referral, down from 3.2 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 1.8 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 5.0 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – November 2022



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 2,172,200 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during November 2022. This is an increase of 154,600 (7.7%) from November 2021 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric ultrasound with 689,800 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.8% of all activity in November 2022. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 400 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.02% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 7.2% from the same period last year.

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

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

	Nov-22	Nov-21	YTD 22/23	YTD 21/22	Growth Nov 22 vs Nov 21	Growth YTD 22/23 vs YTD 21/22	Adjusted Growth Nov 22 vs Nov 21	Adjusted Growth YTD 22/23 vs YTD 21/22
MRI	339,740	314,916	2,565,703	2,423,741	7.9%	5.9%	7.9%	6.5%
CT	644,791	592,698	4,921,444	4,650,236	8.8%	5.8%	8.8%	6.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	689,773	643,609	4,927,269	4,796,351	7.2%	2.7%	7.2%	3.3%
Barium Enema	3,290	3,140	23,551	25,027	4.8%	-5.9%	4.8%	-5.3%
Dexa Scan	45,397	40,807	321,260	295,404	11.2%	8.8%	11.2%	9.4%
Audiology Assessments	94,688	89,668	685,820	639,094	5.6%	7.3%	5.6%	8.0%
Echocardiography	153,205	136,742	1,095,005	1,036,781	12.0%	5.6%	12.0%	6.2%
Electrophysiology	386	1,570	5,706	6,673	-75.4%	-14.5%	-75.4%	-14.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,981	19,932	146,738	145,082	0.2%	1.1%	0.2%	1.7%
Sleep Studies	12,596	10,539	90,701	77,273	19.5%	17.4%	19.5%	18.1%
Urodynamics	5,788	6,171	41,505	45,071	-6.2%	-7.9%	-6.2%	-7.4%
Colonoscopy	56,857	52,439	406,772	391,277	8.4%	4.0%	8.4%	4.6%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,202	18,291	135,571	138,482	-0.5%	-2.1%	-0.5%	-1.5%
Cystoscopy	27,846	28,096	213,459	218,344	-0.9%	-2.2%	-0.9%	-1.7%
Gastroscopy	59,610	58,923	455,207	457,702	1.2%	-0.5%	1.2%	0.0%
All Tests	2,172,150	2,017,541	16,035,711	15,346,538	7.7%	4.5%	7.7%	5.1%

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 November 2022 for the months January 2021 through to January 2022.

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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