

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS England and NHS Improvement



NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

January 2023 Monthly Report

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NHS England

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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 January 2023 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 January 2023 was 486,000. This was 30.8% 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 January 2022 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 51,700 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 0.8 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 31.3% (December 2022).
- At the end of January 2023, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 4.0%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 46.7% 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 January 2023.
- There were 1,580,200 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of January 2023. This is an increase of 129,000 from January 2022.
- A total of 2,174,000 diagnostic tests were undertaken in January 2023. This is an increase of 268,000 from January 2022.

3 National Trends

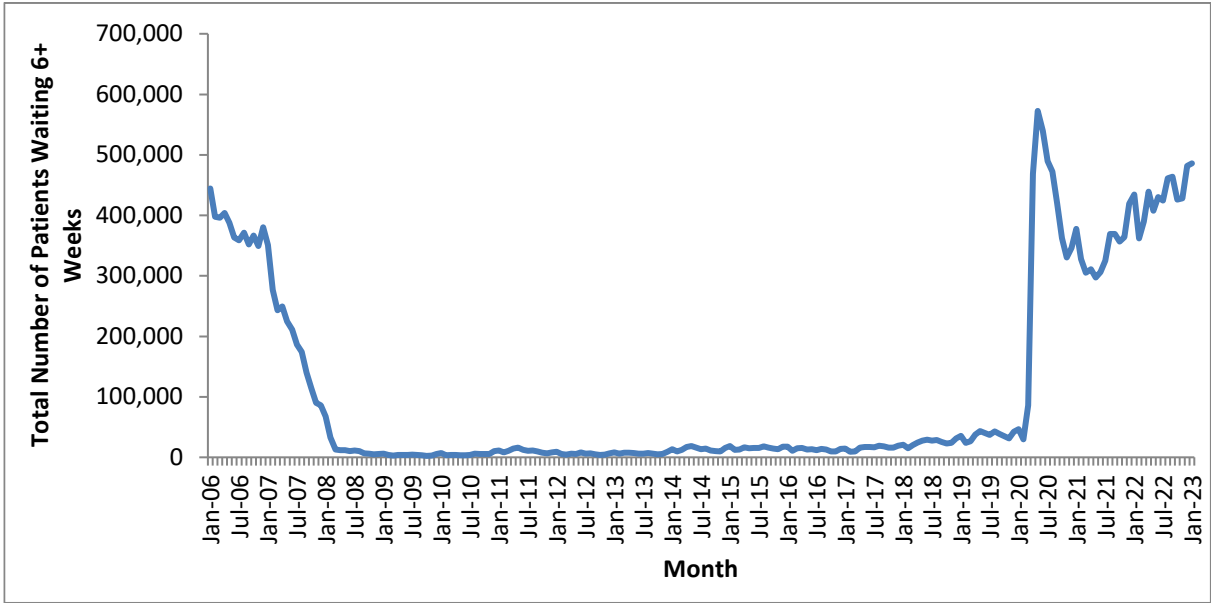
This section analyses trends in monthly diagnostic waiting times and activity data that has been collected since January 2006.

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.

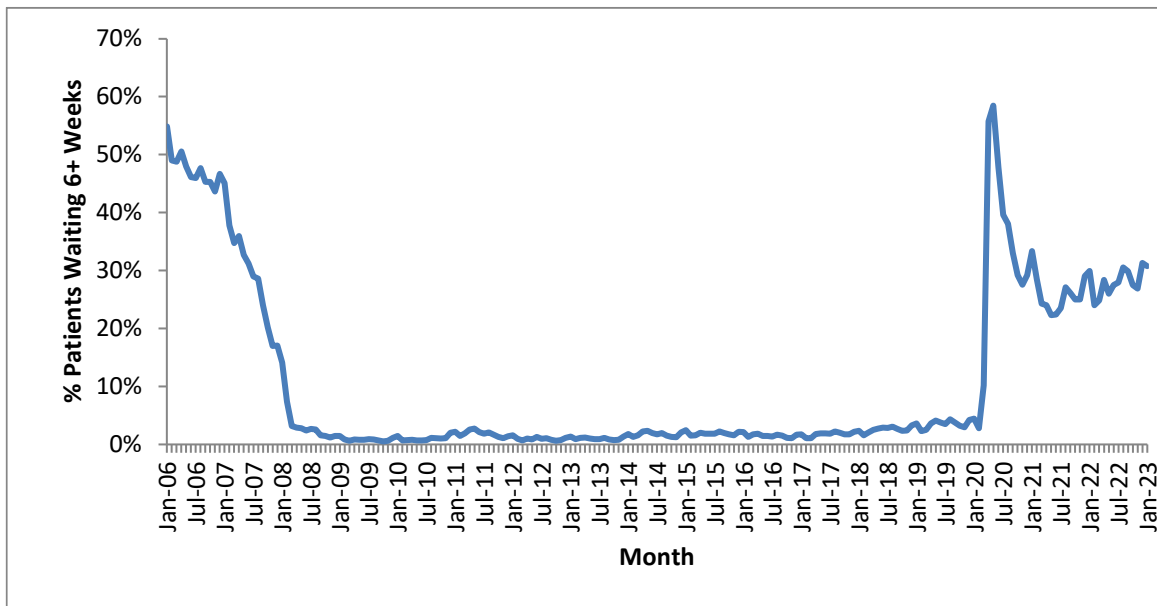
3.1.2. Since March 2008 there were fluctuations in the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more, with a significant rise between December 2013 and May 2014. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more rose sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In January 2023 there was an increase of 4,000 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 January 2023



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 31.3% (December 2022). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

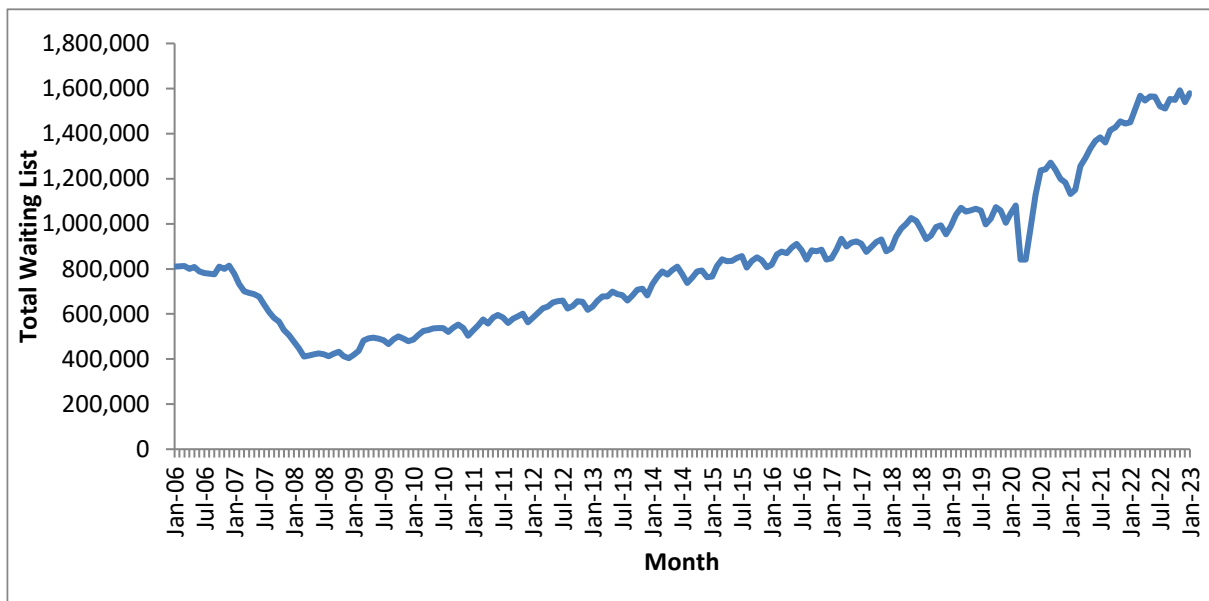
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to January 2023**



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.

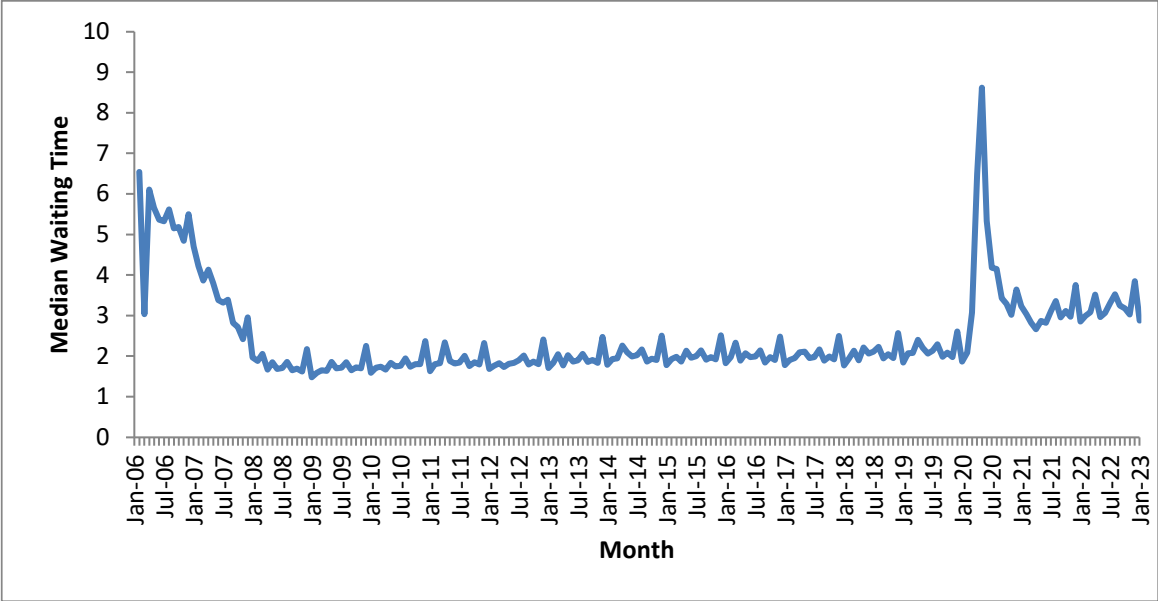
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to January 2023**



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 3.9 weeks (December 2022) and a low of 2.9 weeks (January 2023). The median waiting time in January 2023 was 2.9 weeks.

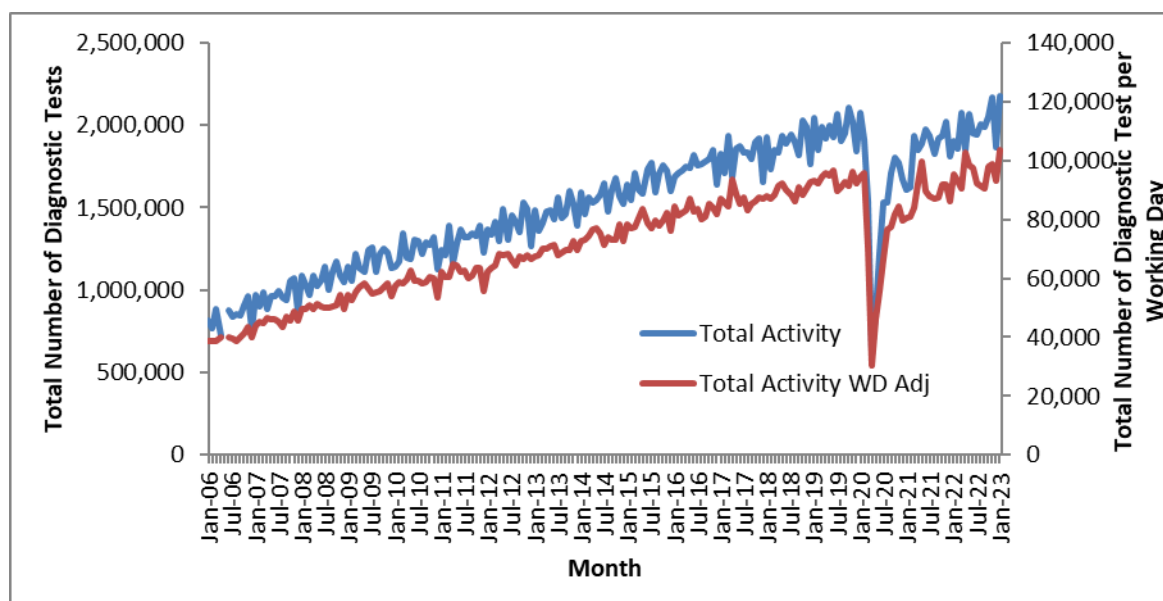
Chart 4: Median waiting time for all tests – January 2006 to January 2023



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 January 2023**



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 Barium Enema, where January 2023 activity was 3.3% higher per month than January 2022 (Table 1).

Table 1: Total activity, by test – January 2022 and January 2023

	Jan-22	Jan-23	Average monthly growth
MRI	307,777	344,340	0.9%
CT	586,903	664,211	1.0%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	589,380	674,459	1.1%
Barium Enema	2,986	4,394	3.3%
Dexa Scan	36,075	44,488	1.8%
Audiology Assessments	80,257	93,326	1.3%
Echocardiography	126,222	150,102	1.5%
Electrophysiology	610	351	-4.5%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	17,693	20,114	1.1%
Sleep Studies	9,505	12,808	2.5%
Urodynamics	5,199	5,568	0.6%
Colonoscopy	48,099	55,103	1.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	16,193	17,940	0.9%
Cystoscopy	25,567	26,702	0.4%
Gastroscopy	53,453	60,061	1.0%
All Tests	1,905,919	2,173,967	1.1%

4 January 2023 Data

This section analyses the January 2023 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 January 2023, there were a total of 486,000 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 30.8% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with January 2022, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 51,700, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 0.8 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with January 2022, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Electrophysiology, which increased by 18.0 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was CT, which decreased by 6.1 percentage points (Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – January 2022 and January 2023

	Jan-22	Jan-23	Difference (%age points)
MRI	28.7%	26.1%	-2.6
CT	22.9%	16.8%	-6.1
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	22.9%	28.0%	5.1
Barium Enema	6.1%	4.0%	-2.1
Dexa Scan	36.3%	37.1%	0.8
Audiology Assessments	29.8%	36.5%	6.6
Echocardiography	48.0%	44.2%	-3.8
Electrophysiology	11.1%	29.0%	18.0
Peripheral Neurophysiology	30.2%	25.3%	-4.8
Sleep Studies	31.9%	41.4%	9.4
Urodynamics	51.3%	46.7%	-4.7
Colonoscopy	40.6%	44.3%	3.7
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	40.3%	44.6%	4.3
Cystoscopy	34.0%	39.1%	5.1
Gastroscopy	38.5%	37.8%	-0.8
All Tests	29.9%	30.8%	0.8

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

4.1.4. Compared with January 2022, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Physiological Measurement with a decrease of 0.8 percentage points. Endoscopy with an increase of 2.6 percentage points. Imaging increased by 0.8 percentage points while Endoscopy increased by 2.6 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

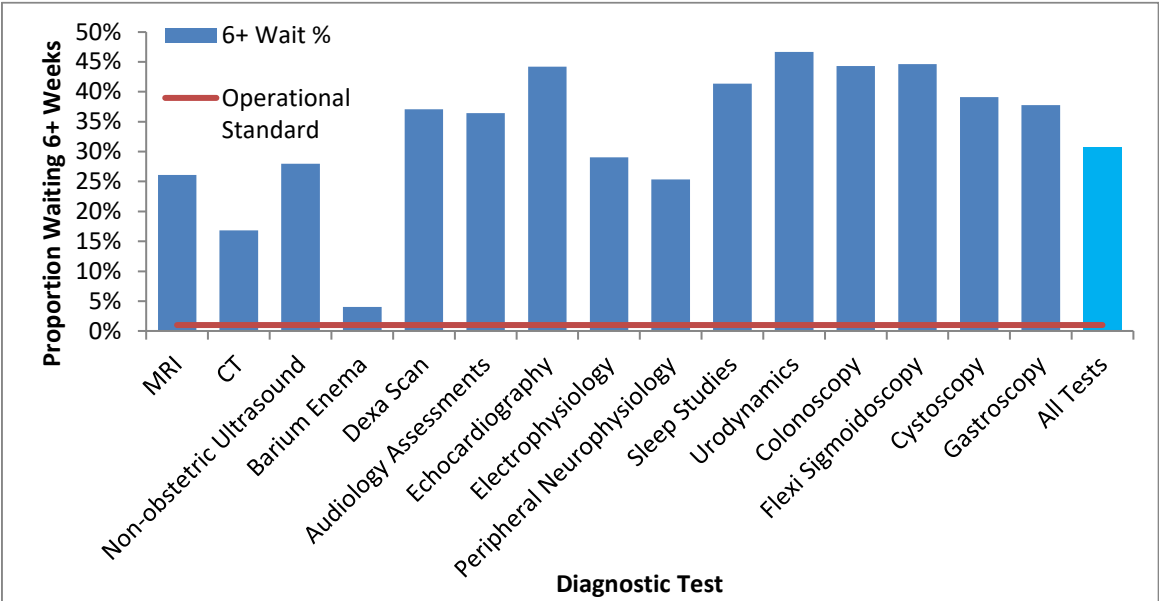
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – January 2022 and January 2023

	Jan-22	Jan-23	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	25.2%	26.1%	0.8
Physiological Measurement	41.1%	40.3%	-0.8
Endoscopy	39.0%	41.5%	2.6
Total	29.9%	30.8%	0.8

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 (4.0%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (46.7%) (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test – January 2023



4.1.6. 145 of the 157 acute trusts that submitted data for January 2023 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 14.2% (London) and 40.0% (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: January 2023 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	30,521	14.2%	214,915	350,970	2.1
South West	54,594	35.5%	153,725	213,188	3.3
South East	75,444	31.7%	237,928	329,239	2.9
Midlands	144,775	40.0%	362,194	394,563	3.7
East of England	67,300	34.8%	193,637	236,602	3.2
North West	58,954	30.0%	196,765	301,370	2.8
North East and Yorkshire	53,350	24.6%	217,038	334,161	2.5
England	485,956	30.8%	1,580,165	2,173,967	2.9

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of January 2023 there were a total of 1,580,200 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 129,000 (8.9%) from January 2022.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 34.5% of the total waiting list, or 535,900 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.04% of the total waiting list, or 600 patients (Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of patients waiting at month end, by test – January 2022 and January 2023

	Jan-22	Jan-23	Growth (%age)
MRI	280,127	294,469	5.1%
CT	185,023	182,610	-1.3%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	475,825	535,949	12.6%
Barium Enema	1,627	1,864	14.6%
Dexa Scan	55,564	62,469	12.4%
Audiology Assessments	67,873	81,964	20.8%
Echocardiography	160,185	164,825	2.9%
Electrophysiology	695	620	-10.8%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	24,361	26,088	7.1%
Sleep Studies	14,111	22,637	60.4%
Urodynamics	7,383	8,072	9.3%
Colonoscopy	65,905	79,926	21.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	22,489	27,553	22.5%
Cystoscopy	21,912	24,134	10.1%
Gastroscopy	68,059	66,985	-1.6%
All Tests	1,451,139	1,580,165	8.9%

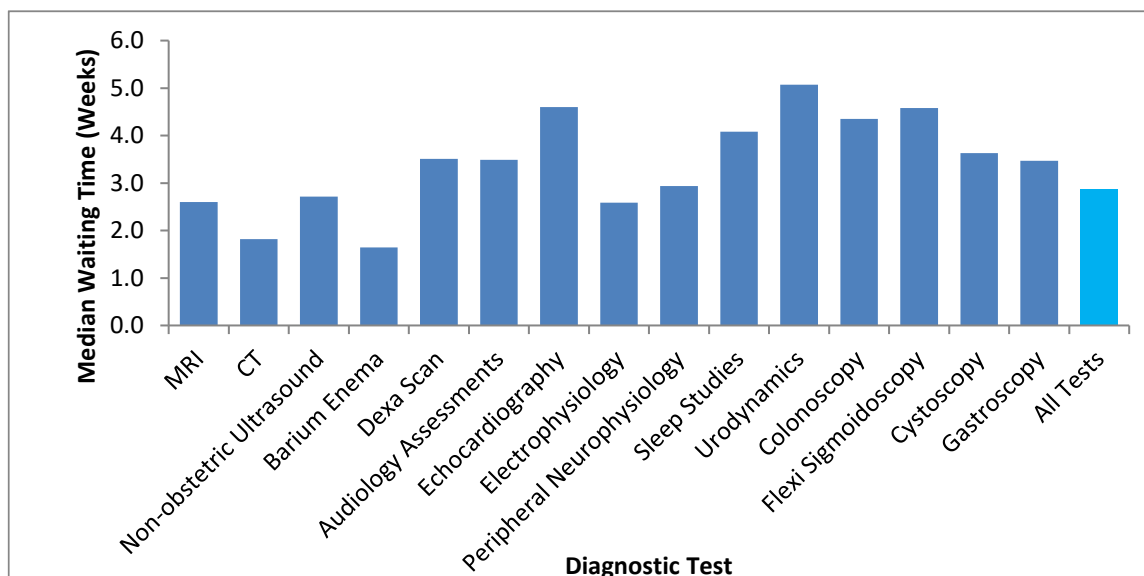
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

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 60.4% compared with January 2022.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of January 2023, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.9 weeks from the time of referral, down from 3.9 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was Barium Enema at 1.6 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 5.1 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – January 2023



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 2,174,000 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during January 2023. This is an increase of 268,000 (8.6%) from January 2022 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound with 674,500 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.0% of all activity in January 2023. 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 6.2% from the same period last year.

Table 6: Total activity and growth, by test – January 2022 and January 2023

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

	Jan-23	Jan-22	YTD 22/23	YTD 21/22	Growth Jan 23 vs Jan 22	Growth YTD 22/23 vs YTD 21/22	Adjusted Growth Jan 23 vs Jan 22	Adjusted Growth YTD 22/23 vs YTD 21/22
MRI	344,340	307,777	3,216,680	3,020,560	11.9%	6.5%	6.6%	7.5%
CT	664,211	586,903	6,186,349	5,808,799	13.2%	6.5%	7.8%	7.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	674,459	589,380	6,159,642	5,938,476	14.4%	3.7%	9.0%	4.7%
Barium Enema	4,394	2,986	30,683	30,943	47.2%	-0.8%	40.1%	0.1%
Dexa Scan	44,488	36,075	402,002	365,561	23.3%	10.0%	17.4%	11.0%
Audiology Assessments	93,326	80,257	852,614	795,722	16.3%	7.1%	10.7%	8.2%
Echocardiography	150,102	126,222	1,368,193	1,279,921	18.9%	6.9%	13.3%	7.9%
Electrophysiology	351	610	6,358	7,821	-42.5%	-18.7%	-45.2%	-17.9%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,114	17,693	182,560	178,945	13.7%	2.0%	8.3%	3.0%
Sleep Studies	12,808	9,505	113,599	95,407	34.8%	19.1%	28.3%	20.2%
Urodynamics	5,568	5,199	51,648	55,150	7.1%	-6.3%	2.0%	-5.4%
Colonoscopy	55,103	48,099	508,103	482,986	14.6%	5.2%	9.1%	6.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,940	16,193	168,630	169,748	10.8%	-0.7%	5.5%	0.3%
Cystoscopy	26,702	25,567	263,015	269,697	4.4%	-2.5%	-0.5%	-1.5%
Gastroscopy	60,061	53,453	564,917	561,264	12.4%	0.7%	7.0%	1.6%
All Tests	2,173,967	1,905,919	20,074,993	19,061,000	14.1%	5.3%	8.6%	6.3%

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 January 2023 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

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