

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

March 2023 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.

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.

The NHS Standard Contract 2022/23 states that there is a standard threshold of 1% for this pledge. NHS England's planning guidance for 2023/24 requests that a threshold of at least 5% should be met by March 2025.

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+ Week 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 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 March 2023 was 407,200. This was 25.0% 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 2022 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 17,300 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 0.2 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 25.0% (March 2023) and 31.3% (December 2022).
- At the end of March 2023, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 2.3%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 42.5% 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 2023.
- There were 1,628,300 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of March 2023. This is an increase of 59,400 from March 2022.
- A total of 2,302,400 diagnostic tests were undertaken in March 2023. This is an increase of 223,100 from March 2022.

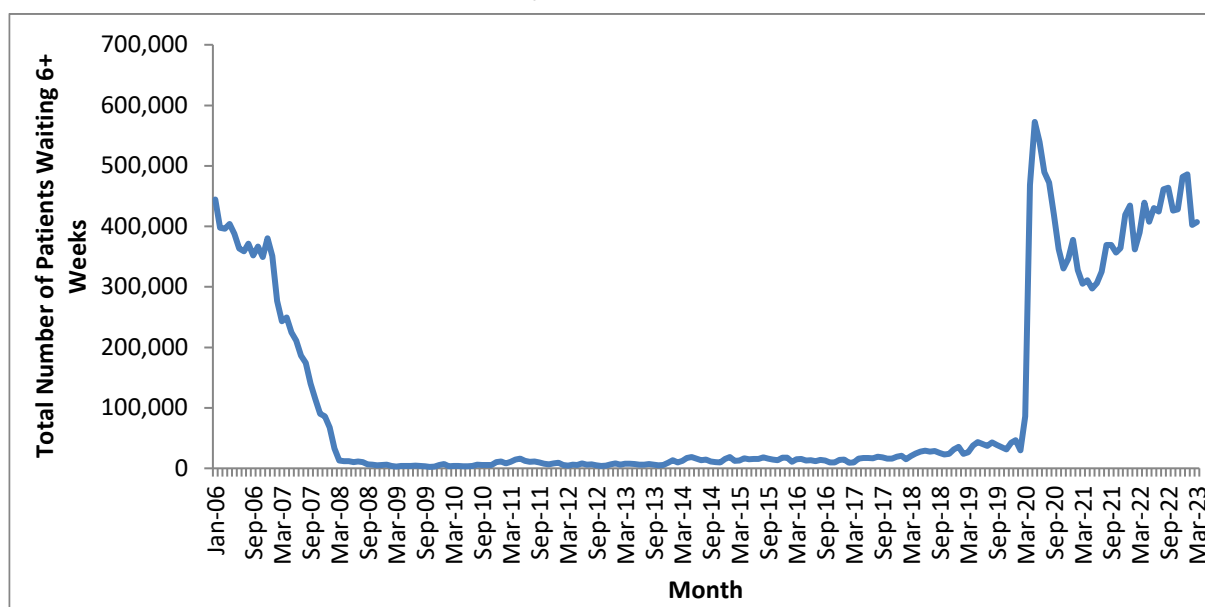
3 National Trends

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. 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.
- 3.1.2. The number of patients waiting six weeks or more rose sharply in April 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. In March 2023 there was an increase of 5,000 in the number of patients waiting six weeks or more from the previous month.

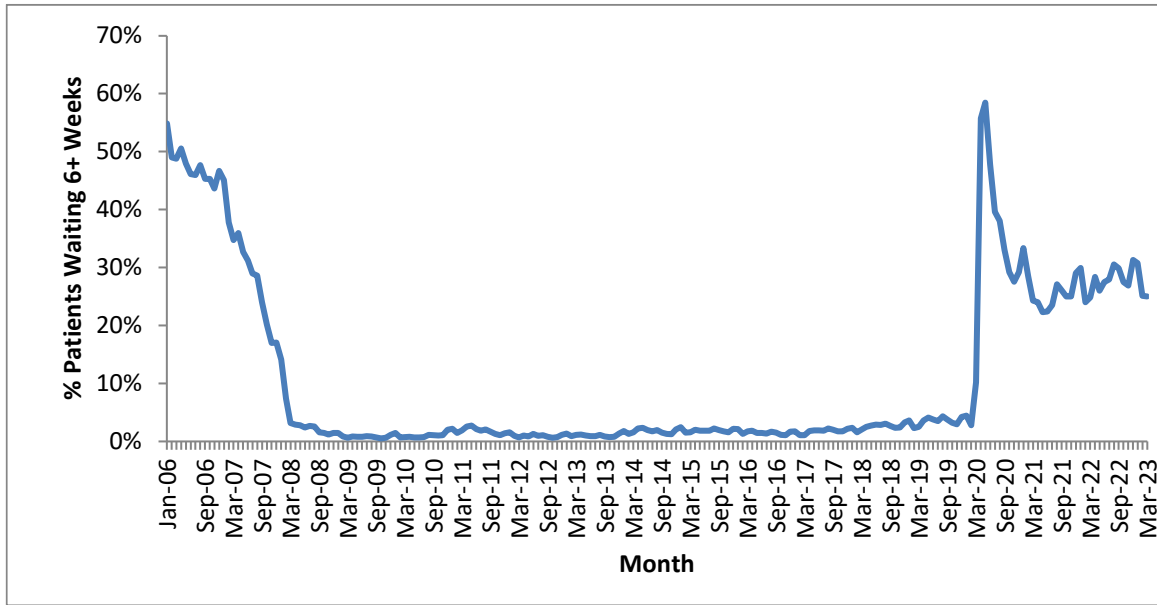
Chart 1: Total number of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests January 2006 to March 2023



- 3.1.3. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more shows a similar pattern (Chart 2). In the last 12 months, the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more at the end of a month has varied between 25.0% (March 2023) and 31.3% (December 2022). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

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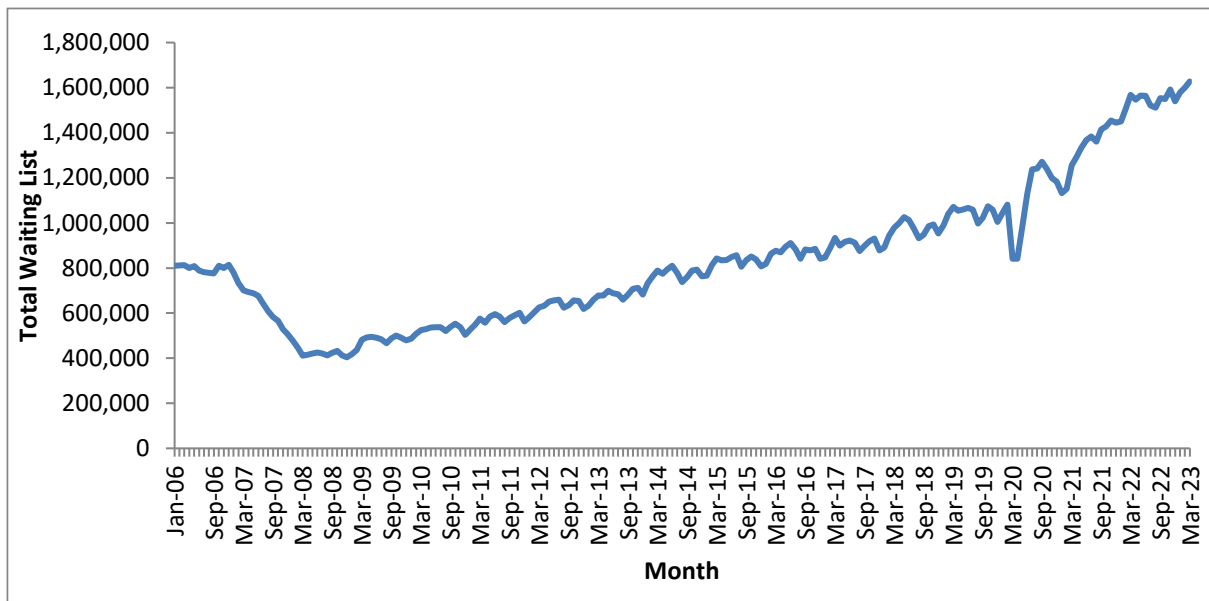
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2023**



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 fell 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.

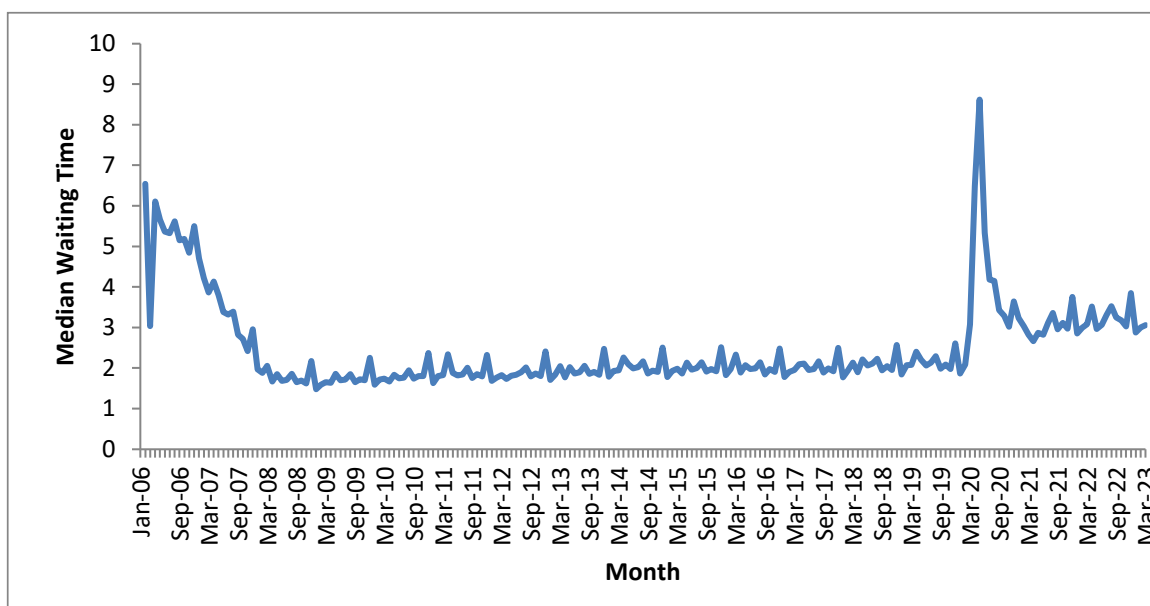
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to March 2023**



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 March 2023 was 3.1 weeks.

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

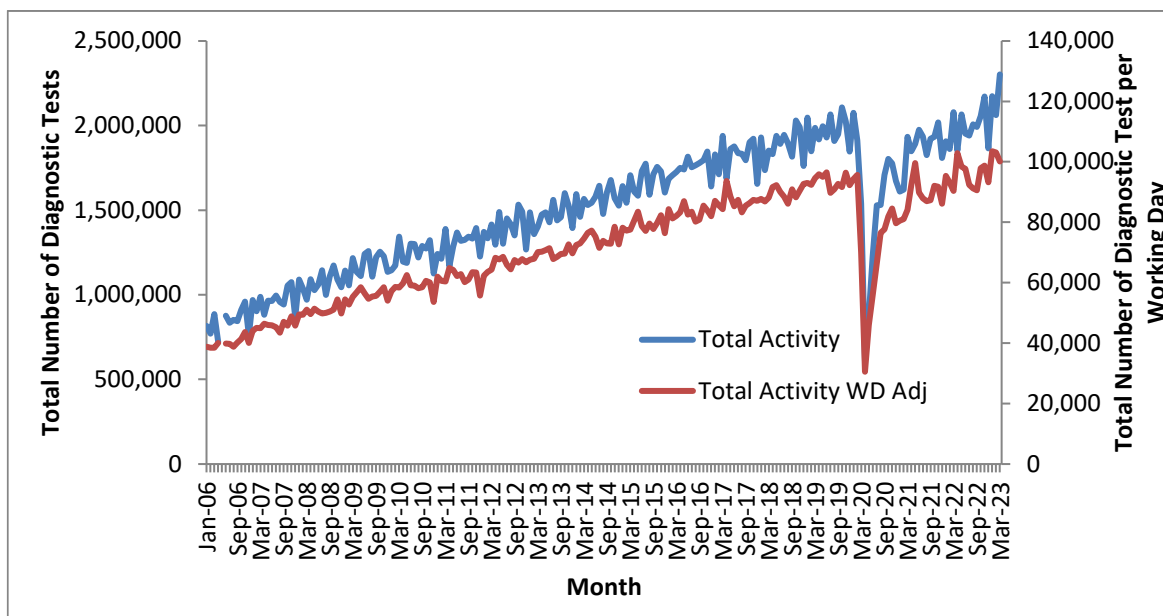


3.4 Total Activity

- 3.4.1. The monthly activity figure can significantly fluctuate month to month, with particularly notable decreases in December due to the bank holidays. If the data is adjusted to show activity per working day, the monthly variation becomes less pronounced (Chart 5).
- 3.4.2. The underlying trend showed an increase from January 2006 to the COVID-19 period when total activity in April 2020 fell by 68% compared to April 2019. Monthly activity subsequently started to rise again, with some further setbacks, and recover to pre-pandemic levels.

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**Chart 5: Total activity and working day adjusted activity per month for all tests
January 2006 to March 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 Sleep Studies, where March 2023 activity was 1.6% higher per month than March 2022 (Table 1).

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

	Mar-22	Mar-23	Average monthly growth
MRI	329,448	370,621	1.0%
CT	620,891	691,851	0.9%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	651,809	719,097	0.8%
Barium Enema	3,227	3,559	0.8%
Dexa Scan	40,187	47,764	1.4%
Audiology Assessments	91,435	97,357	0.5%
Echocardiography	143,404	159,245	0.9%
Electrophysiology	828	653	-2.0%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	20,123	21,167	0.4%
Sleep Studies	11,386	13,822	1.6%
Urodynamics	5,549	5,575	0.0%
Colonoscopy	52,110	59,446	1.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,191	18,961	0.3%
Cystoscopy	29,249	28,246	-0.3%
Gastroscopy	61,425	64,986	0.5%
All Tests	2,079,262	2,302,350	0.9%

4 March 2023 Data

This section analyses the March 2023 diagnostic waiting times and activity data and includes comparisons between tests, regions, providers and commissioners.

4.1 6+ Week Waits

- 4.1.1. At the end of March 2023, there were a total of 407,200 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 25.0% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with March 2022, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 17,300, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more increased by 0.2 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with March 2022, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Flexi-Sigmoidoscopy, which increased by 5.8 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Electrophysiology, which decreased by 18.2 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Mar-22	Mar-23	Difference (%age points)
MRI	22.7%	20.7%	-2.0
CT	18.7%	13.7%	-4.9
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	18.6%	20.9%	2.2
Barium Enema	4.4%	2.3%	-2.0
Dexa Scan	31.7%	32.3%	0.6
Audiology Assessments	25.0%	30.8%	5.8
Echocardiography	41.1%	37.7%	-3.4
Electrophysiology	34.3%	16.2%	-18.2
Peripheral Neurophysiology	21.1%	20.5%	-0.6
Sleep Studies	32.2%	34.4%	2.2
Urodynamics	48.1%	42.5%	-5.6
Colonoscopy	35.6%	40.1%	4.5
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	35.4%	41.3%	5.8
Cystoscopy	32.6%	35.5%	2.9
Gastroscopy	34.5%	33.0%	-1.6
All Tests	24.8%	25.0%	0.2

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.4. Compared with March 2022, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Imaging with a decrease of 0.1 percentage points. Endoscopy increased by 2.5 percentage points, while Physiological Measurements decreased by 0.8 percentage points (Table 3). See section 5.4 for which tests are included under the different test types.

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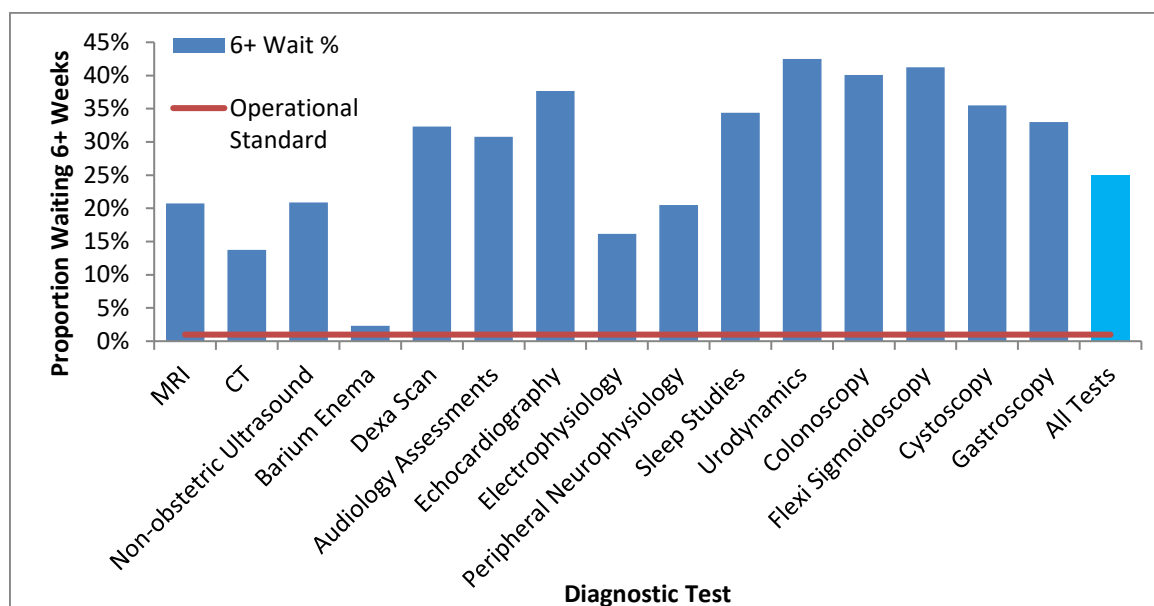
Table 3: Proportion of patients waiting 6+ weeks, by test type – March 2022 and March 2023

	Mar-22	Mar-23	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	20.5%	20.3%	-0.1
Physiological Measurement	34.8%	34.0%	-0.8
Endoscopy	34.8%	37.2%	2.5
Total	24.8%	25.0%	0.2

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 (2.3%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (42.5%) (Chart 6).

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



- 4.1.6. 141 of the 157 acute trusts that submitted data for March 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 Regions met the 1% operational standard. The proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more for a diagnostic test varied by region between 10.6% (London) and 33.8% (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.

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Table 4: March 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	23,954	10.6%	225,992	369,455	2.3
South West	42,647	27.6%	154,318	223,629	3.2
South East	69,613	27.1%	257,073	345,872	3.2
Midlands	122,433	33.8%	362,408	425,744	3.7
East of England	55,618	28.4%	195,698	257,970	3.5
North West	47,421	23.3%	203,231	320,517	2.8
North East and Yorkshire	44,697	19.8%	225,776	344,811	2.8
England	407,167	25.0%	1,628,321	2,302,350	3.1

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

- 4.2.1. At the end of March 2023 there were a total of 1,628,300 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 59,400 (3.8%) from March 2022.
- 4.2.2. The test with the largest waiting list was Non-obstetric Ultrasound, which accounted for 34.6% of the total waiting list, or 563,800 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.03% of the total waiting list, or 500 patients (Table 5).

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

	Mar-22	Mar-23	Growth (%age)
MRI	302,825	301,866	-0.3%
CT	193,707	181,662	-6.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	529,796	563,764	6.4%
Barium Enema	1,838	2,228	21.2%
Dexa Scan	61,747	68,353	10.7%
Audiology Assessments	79,639	92,236	15.8%
Echocardiography	167,337	159,874	-4.5%
Electrophysiology	891	458	-48.6%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	24,803	27,169	9.5%
Sleep Studies	15,898	25,011	57.3%
Urodynamics	7,793	8,222	5.5%
Colonoscopy	66,512	77,809	17.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	23,132	27,352	18.2%
Cystoscopy	22,968	25,391	10.5%
Gastroscopy	70,028	66,926	-4.4%
All Tests	1,568,914	1,628,321	3.8%

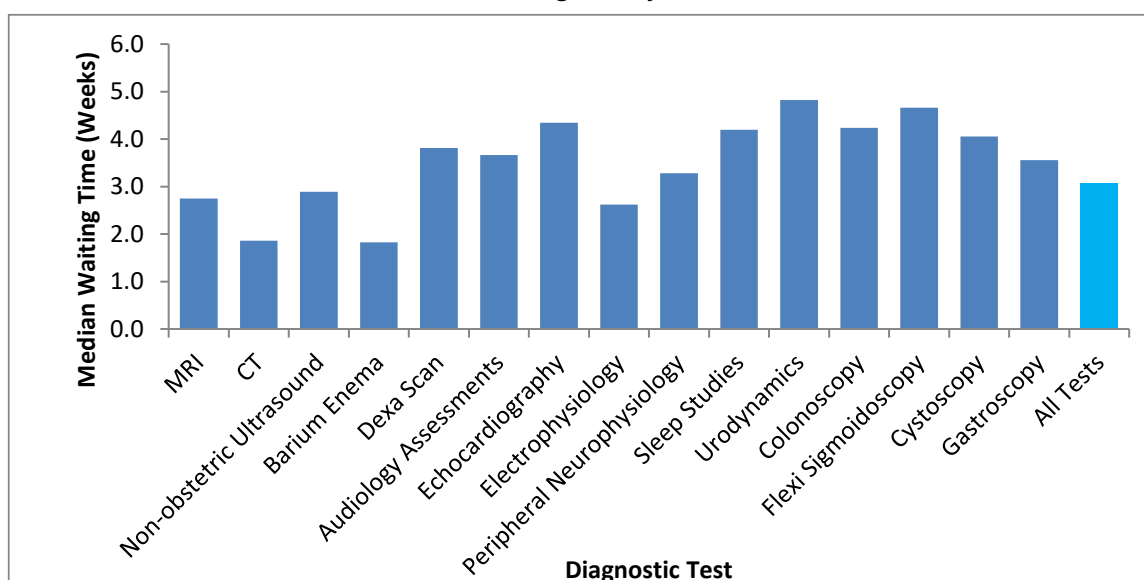
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Sleep Studies where the waiting list grew by 57.3% compared with March 2022.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

4.3.1. At the end of March 2023, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 3.1 weeks from the time of referral, up from 3.0 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 4.8 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – March 2023



4.4 Total Activity

4.4.1. In total 2,302,400 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during March 2023. This is an increase of 223,100 (10.7%) from March 2022 (Table 6).

4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-Obstetric Ultrasound with 719,100 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.2% of all activity in March 2023. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 700 tests taking place. This accounted for 0.03% of all activity this month.

4.4.3. The number of tests conducted over the last 12 months has increased by 7.1% from the same period last year.

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

	Mar-23	Mar-22	YTD 22/23	YTD 21/22	Growth Mar 23 vs Mar 22	Growth YTD 22/23 vs YTD 21/22	Adjusted Growth Mar 23 vs Mar 22	Adjusted Growth YTD 22/23 vs YTD 21/22
MRI	370,621	329,448	3,919,886	3,645,751	12.5%	7.5%	12.5%	8.4%
CT	691,851	620,891	7,503,052	6,989,912	11.4%	7.3%	11.4%	8.2%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	719,097	651,809	7,516,980	7,168,038	10.3%	4.9%	10.3%	5.7%
Barium Enema	3,559	3,227	37,317	36,916	10.3%	1.1%	10.3%	1.9%
Dexa Scan	47,764	40,187	491,601	442,068	18.9%	11.2%	18.9%	12.1%
Audiology Assessments	97,357	91,435	1,035,010	968,326	6.5%	6.9%	6.5%	7.7%
Echocardiography	159,245	143,404	1,670,788	1,550,120	11.0%	7.8%	11.0%	8.6%
Electrophysiology	653	828	7,300	9,471	-21.1%	-22.9%	-21.1%	-22.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,167	20,123	222,493	216,650	5.2%	2.7%	5.2%	3.5%
Sleep Studies	13,822	11,386	139,731	116,648	21.4%	19.8%	21.4%	20.7%
Urodynamics	5,575	5,549	62,468	66,046	0.5%	-5.4%	0.5%	-4.7%
Colonoscopy	59,446	52,110	621,156	583,714	14.1%	6.4%	14.1%	7.3%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,961	18,191	205,489	204,770	4.2%	0.4%	4.2%	1.2%
Cystoscopy	28,246	29,249	316,353	325,217	-3.4%	-2.7%	-3.4%	-2.0%
Gastroscopy	64,986	61,425	688,573	678,121	5.8%	1.5%	5.8%	2.4%
All Tests	2,302,350	2,079,262	24,438,197	23,001,768	10.7%	6.2%	10.7%	7.1%

5 Community Diagnostic Centre March 2023 Data

This section analyses the March 2023 activity data for Community Diagnostic Centres (CDCs) and includes comparisons with the main March 2023 activity data. Activity data for CDCs includes all the activity they have performed in the month for 15 diagnostic tests (which comprise around half of the diagnostic tests they provide); no waiting list data is collected for CDCs. The CDC activity is also included in the main activity report, since that covers diagnostic tests in all settings, but is only identified as CDC activity in the separate tables.

5.1 CDC activity

5.1.1. In March 2023, CDCs performed 112,600 diagnostic tests, 4.9% of the total. The most common were imaging tests and the highest percentage of tests by CDCs was for Magnetic Resonance Imaging (7.3%), see Table 7.

Table 7: Total and CDC activity, by test – March 2023

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
Magnetic Resonance Imaging	370,621	27,044	7.3%
Computed Tomography	691,851	38,237	5.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	719,097	33,275	4.6%
Barium Enema	3,559	-	0.0%
DEXA Scan	47,764	2,135	4.5%
Audiology - Audiology Assessments	97,357	1,223	1.3%
Cardiology - Echocardiography	159,245	3,544	2.2%
Cardiology - Electrophysiology	653	-	0.0%
Neurophysiology - Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,167	212	1.0%
Respiratory physiology - Sleep Studies	13,822	472	3.4%
Urodynamics - Pressures & Flows	5,575	46	0.8%
Colonoscopy	59,446	3,002	5.0%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,961	767	4.0%
Cystoscopy	28,246	505	1.8%
Gastroscopy	64,986	2,152	3.3%
All tests	2,302,350	112,614	4.9%

5.1.2. The region with the highest diagnostic activity in CDCs was Midlands in March 2023, with 26,000 tests (6.1% of the total), whilst the region with the highest percentage of tests by CDCs was the South East (7.3%), see Table 8.

Table 8: Total and CDC activity, by region – March 2023

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
London	369,455	15,925	4.3%
South West	223,629	5,389	2.4%
South East	345,872	25,203	7.3%
Midlands	425,744	25,984	6.1%
East of England	257,970	5,143	2.0%
North West	320,517	21,403	6.7%
North East and Yorkshire	344,811	13,357	3.9%
England	2,302,350	112,614	4.9%

5.2 CDC data completeness

5.2.1. In March 2023, 76 CDCs were invited to submit activity data, of which 72 (95%) are included in the activity counts. The activity is CDC-funded and should exclude services that have moved to the CDC from existing sites, making it additional activity.

6 Annex

6.1 Methodology

5.1.1. NHS England 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 via SDCS where it is checked and signed off by commissioners. For further details on how the data is collected and the SDCS system, please refer to the [NHSE Collection Guidance](#).

6.2 Data Revisions

5.2.1. Revisions to published figures are released on a six-monthly basis and in accordance with the NHS England’s revision policy. For more information on the revision policy please refer to the [SDCS Revisions Policy Document](#). Revisions were last published in March 2023 for the months January 2021 through to March 2022.

6.3 Data Availability

5.3.1. Monthly diagnostic waiting time and activity data is published on a monthly timetable. [A full calendar of all statistical publications can be found here](#).

6.4 Glossary

Community Diagnostic Centre

Community diagnostic centres (CDCs) provide a broad range of elective diagnostics (including checks, scans and tests) away from acute facilities, so reducing pressure on hospitals, providing quicker access to tests and greater convenience to patients. The earliest CDCs were started in 2021 and the list of sites and their services continues to expand. CDCs may use a range of spoke sites and submit aggregated activity data for them. They are hosted by acute Trusts but may receive patients from other Trusts.

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.

Integrated Care Board (ICB)

Integrated care boards (ICBs) replaced clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) in the NHS in England from 1 July 2022. ICBs oversee partnerships of organisations that come together to plan and deliver joined up health and care services.

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 responsible for the quality, financial and operational performance of all NHS organisations in their region.

6.5 Feedback Welcomed

We welcome feedback on the content and presentation of statistics within this report and those published on the NHS England website.

If you have any comments on this, or any other issues regarding these statistics, then please email england.nhsdata@nhs.net

Alternatively, we welcome your comments via our user feedback form [here](#).

Feedback about the user's experiences of using these statistics is available [here](#).

6.6 Consultation

Between 8 February 2018 and 5 April 2018, NHS England consulted on the future of the Quarterly Diagnostics Census and Monthly Diagnostics Waiting Times and Activity Returns. The outcome document for the consultation was published 30 March 2020 and confirmed the decision to stop collecting the Quarterly Diagnostics Census on a permanent basis and to continue the monthly diagnostics waiting times and activity return (DM01) in its current form. Find out more at:

<https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/consultation/diagnostics-census-waiting-times-activity-return>

6.7 Additional Information

[Full details of diagnostics data for individual organisations are available here.](#)

For press enquiries please contact the NHS England media team on 0113 825 0958 or 0113 825 0959. Email enquiries should be directed to nhsengland.media@nhs.net

The Government Statistical Service (GSS) statistician responsible for producing these data is:

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