

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

NHS Diagnostic Waiting Times and Activity Data

November 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 November 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 November 2023 was 375,200. This was 23.3% 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 2022 the total number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 52,800 while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.5 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 23.3% (November 2023) and 31.3% (December 2022).
- At the end of November 2023, the test with the smallest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema with 7.8%. The test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics, with 40.2% 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 2.8 weeks at the end of November 2023.
- There were 1,609,000 patients waiting for a key diagnostic test at the end of November 2023. This is an increase of 16,000 from November 2022.
- A total of 2,317,600 diagnostic tests were undertaken in November 2023. This is an increase of 136,700 from November 2022.

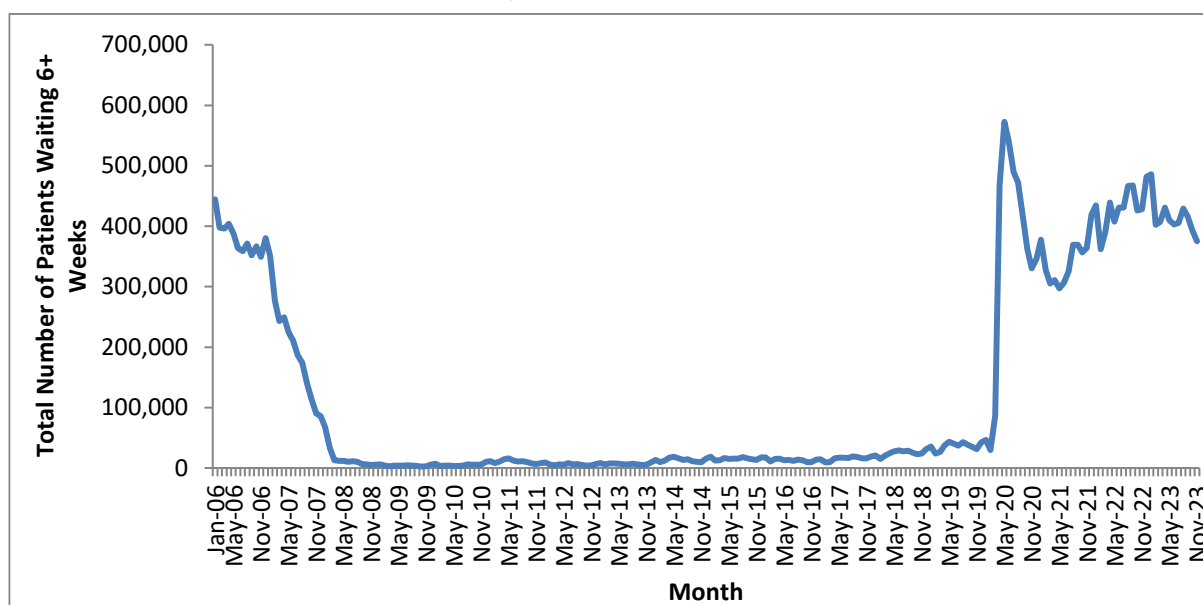
3 National Trends

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

3.1 6+ Week Waits

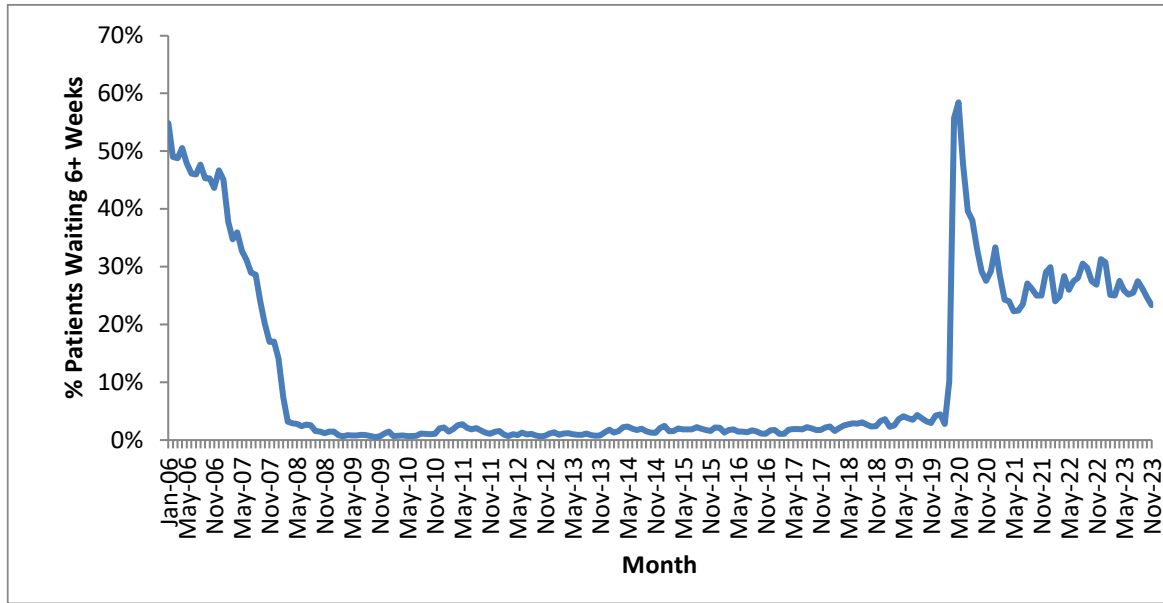
- 3.1.1. The total number of patients waiting six weeks or more dropped sharply between January 2007 and March 2008 (Chart 1), as Trusts worked towards the NHS Improvement Plan (June 2004) milestone that no one should wait six weeks or more for a diagnostic test by March 2008. Since March 2008 there 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 November 2023 there was a decrease of 18,400 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 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 23.3% (November 2023) and 31.3% (December 2022). The 1% operational standard was last met in November 2013.

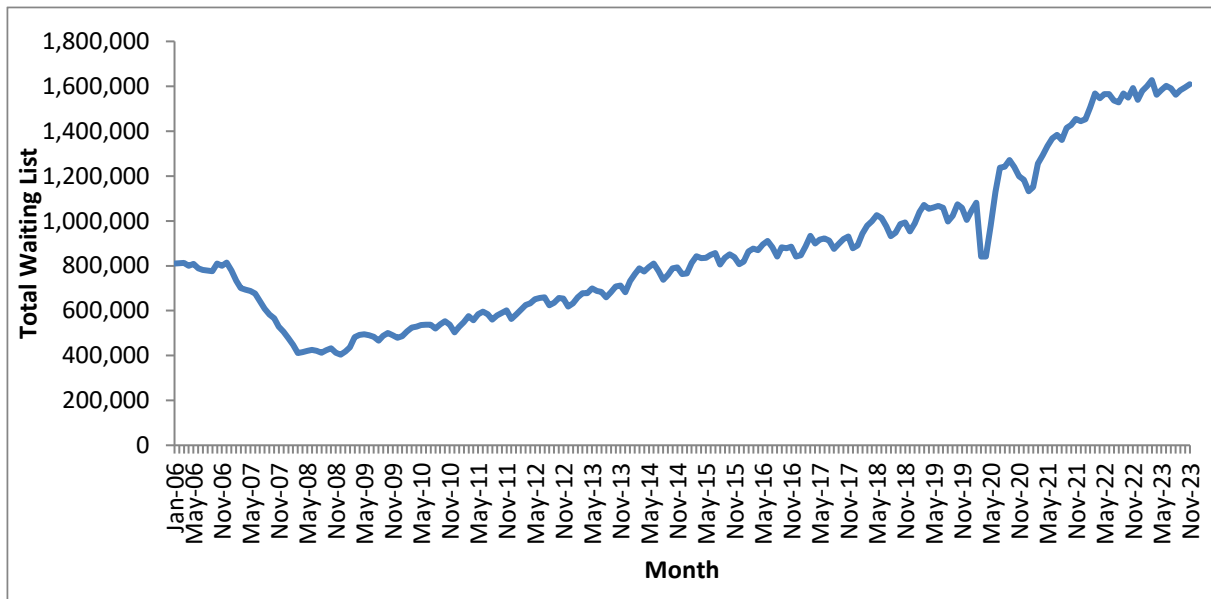
**Chart 2: Percentage of patients waiting 6+ weeks at month end for all tests
January 2006 to November 2023**



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.

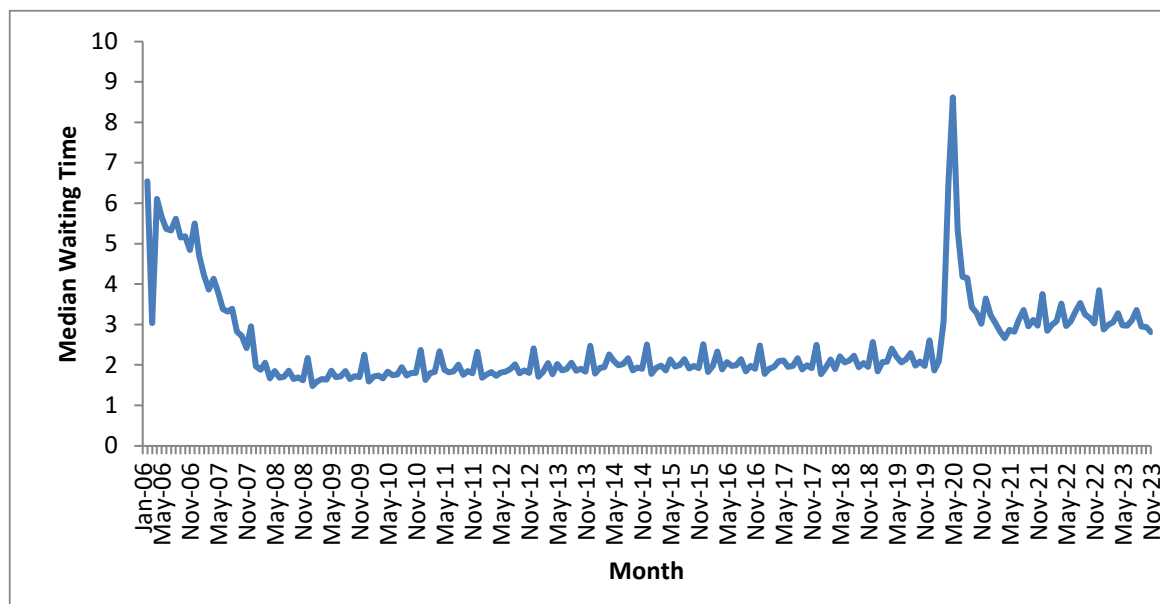
**Chart 3: Total number of patients waiting at month end for all tests
January 2006 to November 2023**



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 2.8 weeks (November 2023). The median waiting time in November 2023 was 2.8 weeks.

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

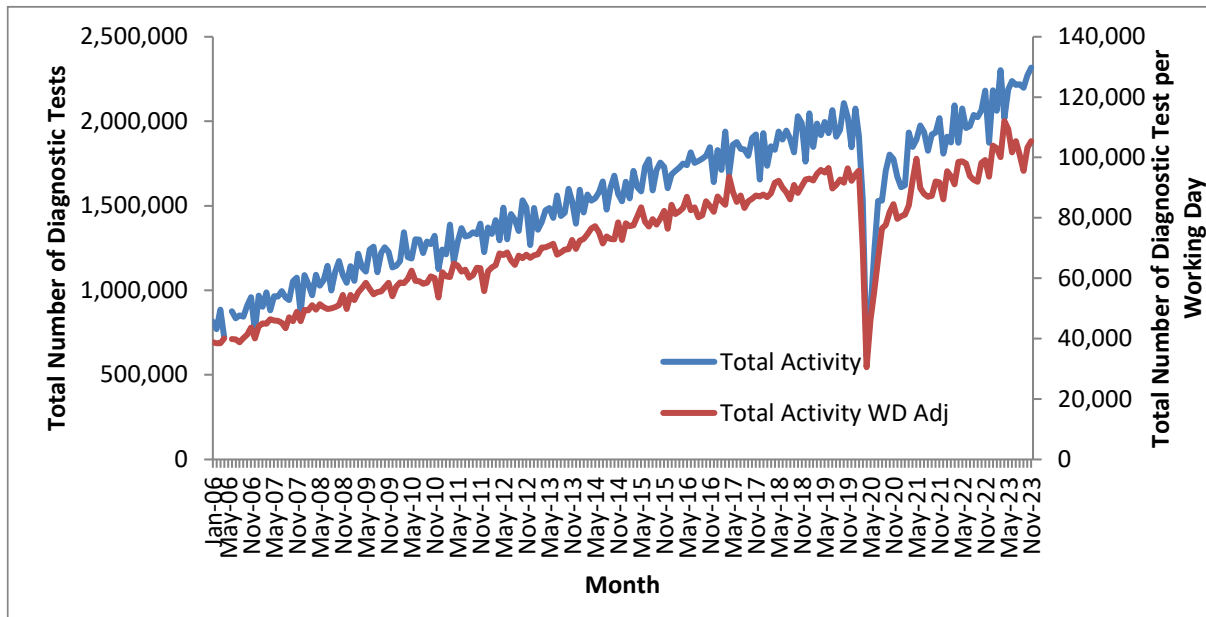


3.4 Total Activity

- 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 November 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 Electrophysiology, where November 2023 activity was 3.7% higher per month than November 2022 (Table 1).

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

	Nov-22	Nov-23	Average monthly growth
MRI	342,059	364,805	0.5%
CT	647,733	691,891	0.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	691,354	732,131	0.5%
Barium Enema	3,288	3,593	0.7%
Dexa Scan	45,397	46,657	0.2%
Audiology Assessments	94,688	108,814	1.2%
Echocardiography	153,205	156,263	0.2%
Electrophysiology	386	600	3.7%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	19,981	21,473	0.6%
Sleep Studies	12,596	15,433	1.7%
Urodynamics	5,792	6,035	0.3%
Colonoscopy	57,455	58,761	0.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	18,382	17,665	-0.3%
Cystoscopy	28,254	30,910	0.8%
Gastroscopy	60,292	62,557	0.3%
All Tests	2,180,862	2,317,588	0.5%

4 November 2023 Data

This section analyses the November 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 November 2023, there were a total of 375,200 patients waiting six weeks or more from referral for one of the 15 key diagnostic tests. This was 23.3% of the total number of patients waiting at the end of the month.
- 4.1.2. Compared with November 2022, the number of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 52,800, while the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more decreased by 3.5 percentage points.
- 4.1.3. Compared with November 2022, the test with the largest increase in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Peripheral Neurophysiology, which increased by 9.1 percentage points. The test with the largest decrease was Echocardiography, which decreased by 7.9 percentage points (Table 2).

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

	Nov-22	Nov-23	Difference (%age points)
MRI	20.8%	17.1%	-3.7
CT	14.1%	14.4%	0.3
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	24.9%	19.8%	-5.1
Barium Enema	3.8%	7.8%	4.1
Dexa Scan	34.6%	29.0%	-5.6
Audiology Assessments	31.8%	37.3%	5.5
Echocardiography	41.4%	33.6%	-7.9
Electrophysiology	21.5%	28.4%	6.9
Peripheral Neurophysiology	18.2%	27.3%	9.1
Sleep Studies	34.1%	36.7%	2.6
Urodynamics	44.8%	40.2%	-4.6
Colonoscopy	40.0%	34.2%	-5.9
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	39.4%	38.3%	-1.1
Cystoscopy	33.3%	29.9%	-3.3
Gastroscopy	33.6%	28.9%	-4.7
All Tests	26.9%	23.3%	-3.5

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

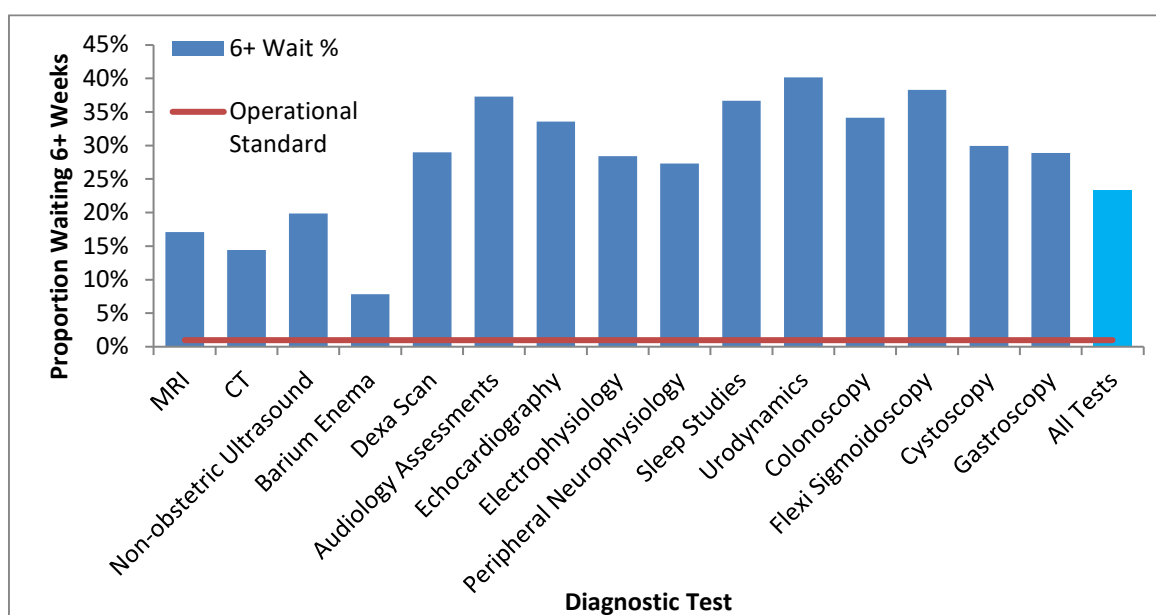
- 4.1.4. Compared with November 2022, the test type with the smallest change in the proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Physiological Measurement with a decrease of 1.8 percentage points. Imaging decreased by 3.9 percentage points, while Endoscopy also decreased by 4.6 percentage points (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 – November 2022 and November 2023

	Nov-22	Nov-23	Difference (%age points)
Imaging	22.5%	18.6%	-3.9
Physiological Measurement	36.2%	34.4%	-1.8
Endoscopy	37.0%	32.4%	-4.6
Total	26.9%	23.3%	-3.5

Note: Figures may differ due to rounding.

- 4.1.5. The operational standard that less than 1% of patients should wait six weeks or more from referral for a diagnostic test was met in none of the 15 key tests this month. The test with the lowest proportion of patients waiting six weeks or more was Barium Enema (7.8%), whilst the test with the highest proportion was Urodynamics (40.2%) (Chart 6).

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

- 4.1.6. 138 of the 155 acute trusts that submitted data for November 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 15.1% (London) and 28.3% (East of England) (Table 4).
- 4.1.9. Feedback from NHS trusts has indicated that variations can exist between different regions due to a variety of reasons, from machines breaking down to staff shortages in trusts that usually only affect one region.

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Table 4: November 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	38,004	15.1%	251,372	328,932	2.4
South West	39,927	25.7%	155,624	226,463	2.9
South East	60,544	24.6%	246,245	360,890	2.8
Midlands	89,656	27.8%	323,021	442,376	3.1
East of England	57,900	28.3%	204,330	264,869	3.3
North West	47,935	23.2%	207,032	322,336	2.8
North East and Yorkshire	40,450	18.6%	217,743	361,727	2.6
England	375,151	23.3%	1,609,018	2,317,588	2.8

*Includes all independent sector providers and excludes centrally commissioned.

4.2 Total Waiting List

4.2.1. At the end of November 2023 there were a total of 1,609,000 patients still waiting for a diagnostic test. This is an increase of 16,000 (1.0%) from November 2022.

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 544,100 patients. The test with the smallest waiting list was Electrophysiology, which accounted for 0.04% of the total waiting list, or 700 patients (Table 5).

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

	Nov-22	Nov-23	Growth (%age)
MRI	302,919	314,511	3.8%
CT	179,527	185,806	3.5%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	554,816	544,079	-1.9%
Barium Enema	1,730	2,553	47.6%
Dexa Scan	62,003	60,633	-2.2%
Audiology Assessments	83,582	92,350	10.5%
Echocardiography	153,866	155,519	1.1%
Electrophysiology	762	690	-9.4%
Peripheral Neuropsychology	24,978	32,313	29.4%
Sleep Studies	21,841	27,657	26.6%
Urodynamics	8,337	8,496	1.9%
Colonoscopy	82,013	71,206	-13.2%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	27,538	25,564	-7.2%
Cystoscopy	22,707	25,886	14.0%
Gastroscopy	66,406	61,755	-7.0%
All Tests	1,593,025	1,609,018	1.0%

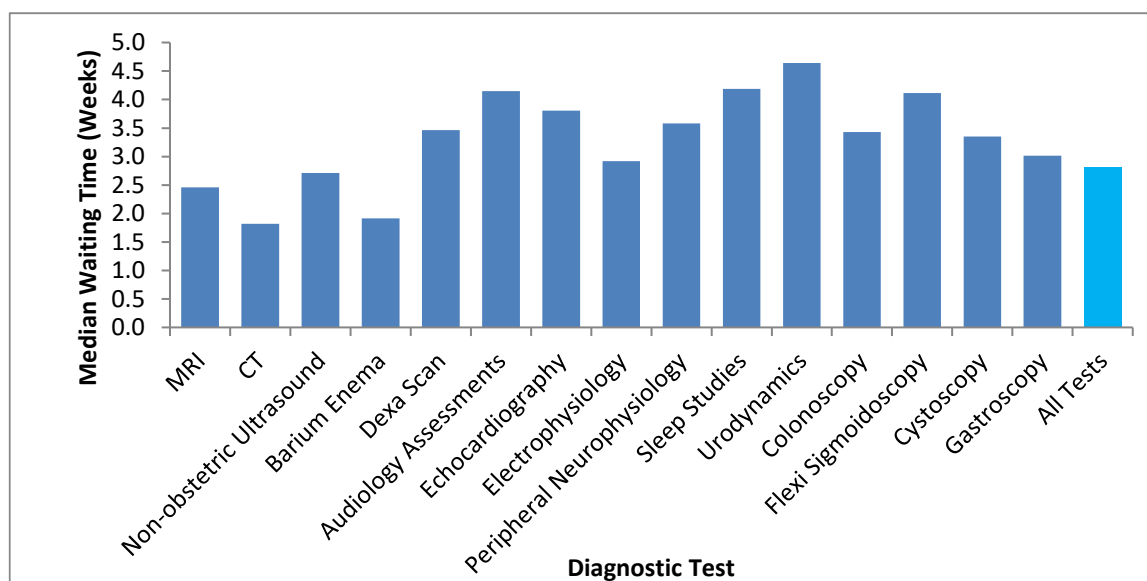
Note: Barium Enema is a test that should be replaced by Colonoscopy or CT Colonography, so the number of tests undertaken should be reducing.

- 4.2.3. The largest increase in the number of patients waiting by test has been for Barium Enema where the waiting list grew by 47.6% compared with November 2022.

4.3 Median Waiting Times

- 4.3.1. At the end of November 2023, the estimated median waiting time for all 15 diagnostic tests was 2.8 weeks from the time of referral, down from 2.9 weeks in the previous month. The test with the shortest median waiting time was CT at 1.8 weeks. The test with the longest median waiting time was Urodynamics at 4.6 weeks (Chart 7).

Chart 7: Median waiting time by test – November 2023



4.4 Total Activity

- 4.4.1. In total 2,317,600 of the 15 key diagnostic tests were performed during November 2023. This is an increase of 136,700 (6.3%, with the same number of working days) from November 2022 (Table 6).
- 4.4.2. The test with the highest activity was Non-obstetric Ultrasound with 732,100 tests taking place. This accounted for 31.6% of all activity in November 2023. The test with the lowest activity was Electrophysiology with 600 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 9.2% from the same period last year (7.9% after adjusting for working days).

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

	Nov-23	Nov-22	YTD 23/24	YTD 22/23	Growth Nov 23 vs Nov 22	Growth YTD 23/24 vs YTD 22/23	Adjusted Growth Nov 23 vs Nov 22	Adjusted Growth YTD 23/24 vs YTD 22/23
MRI	364,805	342,059	2,866,240	2,598,447	6.6%	10.3%	6.6%	9.0%
CT	691,891	647,733	5,400,197	4,967,782	6.8%	8.7%	6.8%	7.4%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	732,131	691,354	5,462,020	4,964,196	5.9%	10.0%	5.9%	8.7%
Barium Enema	3,593	3,288	25,717	23,539	9.3%	9.3%	9.3%	8.0%
Dexa Scan	46,657	45,397	361,426	322,103	2.8%	12.2%	2.8%	10.9%
Audiology Assessments	108,814	94,688	754,807	688,756	14.9%	9.6%	14.9%	8.3%
Echocardiography	156,263	153,205	1,192,804	1,101,672	2.0%	8.3%	2.0%	7.0%
Electrophysiology	600	386	4,772	5,637	55.4%	-15.3%	55.4%	-16.3%
Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,473	19,981	159,162	146,254	7.5%	8.8%	7.5%	7.5%
Sleep Studies	15,433	12,596	115,305	91,403	22.5%	26.2%	22.5%	24.7%
Urodynamics	6,035	5,792	44,015	41,610	4.2%	5.8%	4.2%	4.5%
Colonoscopy	58,761	57,455	438,392	413,673	2.3%	6.0%	2.3%	4.7%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,665	18,382	135,083	137,270	-3.9%	-1.6%	-3.9%	-2.8%
Cystoscopy	30,910	28,254	221,784	215,305	9.4%	3.0%	9.4%	1.8%
Gastroscopy	62,557	60,292	479,697	462,170	3.8%	3.8%	3.8%	2.6%
All Tests	2,317,588	2,180,862	17,661,421	16,179,817	6.3%	9.2%	6.3%	7.9%

5 Community Diagnostic Centre November 2023 Data

This section analyses the November 2023 activity data for Community Diagnostic Centres (CDCs) and includes comparisons with the main November 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 November 2023, CDCs performed 172,800 diagnostic tests, 7.5% of the total. The most common were imaging tests and the highest percentage of imaging tests by CDCs was for Magnetic Resonance Imaging (11.1%), see Table 7.

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

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
Magnetic Resonance Imaging	364,805	40,576	11.1%
Computed Tomography	691,891	52,337	7.6%
Non-obstetric Ultrasound	732,131	60,024	8.2%
Barium Enema	3,593	18	0.5%
DEXA Scan	46,657	2,836	6.1%
Audiology - Audiology Assessments	108,814	978	0.9%
Cardiology - Echocardiography	156,263	9,120	5.8%
Cardiology - Electrophysiology	600	385	64.2%
Neurophysiology - Peripheral Neurophysiology	21,473	119	0.6%
Respiratory physiology - Sleep Studies	15,433	948	6.1%
Urodynamics - Pressures & Flows	6,035	231	3.8%
Colonoscopy	58,761	2,438	4.1%
Flexi Sigmoidoscopy	17,665	552	3.1%
Cystoscopy	30,910	480	1.6%
Gastroscopy	62,557	1,797	2.9%
All tests	2,317,588	172,839	7.5%

5.1.2. In November 2023, the region with the highest diagnostic activity in CDCs was South East, with 36,100 tests (10.0% of their total), this was also the region with the highest percentage of tests by CDCs, see Table 8.

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

Test	All providers	CDCs	% by CDC
London	328,932	22,699	6.9%
South West	226,463	14,983	6.6%
South East	360,890	36,104	10.0%
Midlands	442,376	36,021	8.1%
East of England	264,869	10,859	4.1%
North West	322,336	27,906	8.7%
North East and Yorkshire	361,727	23,589	6.5%
England	2,317,588	172,839	7.5%

5.2 CDC data completeness

5.2.1. In November 2023, 85 CDCs were invited to submit activity data and 82 are included in the activity counts (96% response rate). The activity is CDC-funded and should include all spoke sites and 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 May 2023 for the months January 2021 through to May 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 November 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

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

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