

## **Waiting Times for NHS Services: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

### **Story so far**

In the past statistics about waiting times were only ever reported for individual appointments. So for example, if you had been referred by your GP for a hip replacement you would be reported as on a waiting list for an initial consultation at hospital and then later you would be on a waiting list for the actual operation, once it was decided you need one. There was no way of recording waiting times for all those other hospital appointments and diagnostic tests that may have occurred in between the wait for the first consultation and the operation itself. However, systems are now in place to capture the whole waiting time from GP referral to receiving treatment at hospital.

### **What statistics are currently available on NHS Waiting Times?**

#### **What was available in the past?**

#### **When does a waiting time start for NHS hospital services?**

#### **How are these different waiting times statistics linked?**

#### **How is cardiac referral to treatment times different from general referral to treatment times?**

#### **What are the targets for waiting times for the NHS in Wales?**

#### **How do I know if targets are being met?**

#### **What statistics have been available on NHS waiting times over the years?**

### **What statistics are currently available on NHS Waiting Times?**

There are 3 main monthly data series relating to the time people wait for NHS services and one quarterly output.

#### **Statistics for Referral to Treatment Times**

Information presented in the monthly 'Referral to Treatment Times' release covers the total time waited from referral to hospital treatment in the NHS in Wales and includes time spent waiting for any hospital appointments, tests, scans or other procedures that you may need before being treated. Figures show the amount of time waited by those patients who were still waiting to start treatment at the end of the month and the referral to treatment time experienced by patients who were treated during the month. In terms of referral to treatment times, a patient is defined to have been treated either if, following consultation with a hospital specialist, no hospital treatment is necessary or if treatment begins. This could include:

1. Being admitted to hospital for an operation or treatment
2. Starting treatment that does not require you to stay in hospital (for example, medication or physiotherapy)
3. Beginning your fitting of a medical device such as leg braces
4. Starting an agreed period of time to monitor your condition to see if you need further treatment.

Included in this publication from June 2010 are figures on waiting times for those specialties not covered by Referral to treatment times reporting. Data reported for these specialties are the wait for a first outpatient appointment and the wait from when a decision was made that admission to hospital was required.

Whilst referral to treatment times are the main focus of waiting times in the NHS in Wales, waiting times for these specialties are included so as to complete the picture about those waiting for hospital treatment in Wales.

### **Statistics for Diagnostic tests and Therapy services waiting times**

Information presented in the 'NHS Wales Diagnostic & Therapy services waiting times' release covers the number of people waiting at the end of the month and times waited for specific diagnostic and therapy services. Specified diagnostic tests include for example M.R.I., Diagnostic Endoscopy and Echocardiogram (ECG). Examples of specified therapy services include Physiotherapy or Speech and Language Therapy.

### **Statistics for Accident and Emergency Waiting Times**

Information presented in the 'Time Spent in NHS Wales Accident and Emergency Departments' covers the total time spent in a hospital emergency care facility from arrival until admission, transfer or discharge. The release shows the reported percentage of patients spending less than 4 hours and less than 8 hours in A&E Departments. It reports on Local Health Board performance for major A&E departments, other A&E or minor injury units and the average for all hospital emergency care facilities.

### **Quarterly Statistics for waits for cancer treatment**

Information presented in the 'NHS Wales Cancer Waiting Times' release covers the numbers of patients newly diagnosed with cancer and treated during the quarter. Patients are split into two distinct groups; those referred to hospital with urgent suspected cancer and those not referred as urgent suspected cancer but who are subsequently diagnosed as having cancer.

Further information about waiting times at specific Health Boards and by Specialty is available on the Welsh Assembly Governments statistics dissemination [website StatsWales](#)

### **What was available in the past?**

#### **Statistics for waits for first outpatient appointments and inpatient/day-case admission.**

Until May 2010, information presented in the monthly 'NHS Wales Waiting times' release covered the numbers of people waiting at the end of the month and times waited for first outpatient appointments from referral and for inpatient/ day-case admissions from the time when it was decided that admission was required.

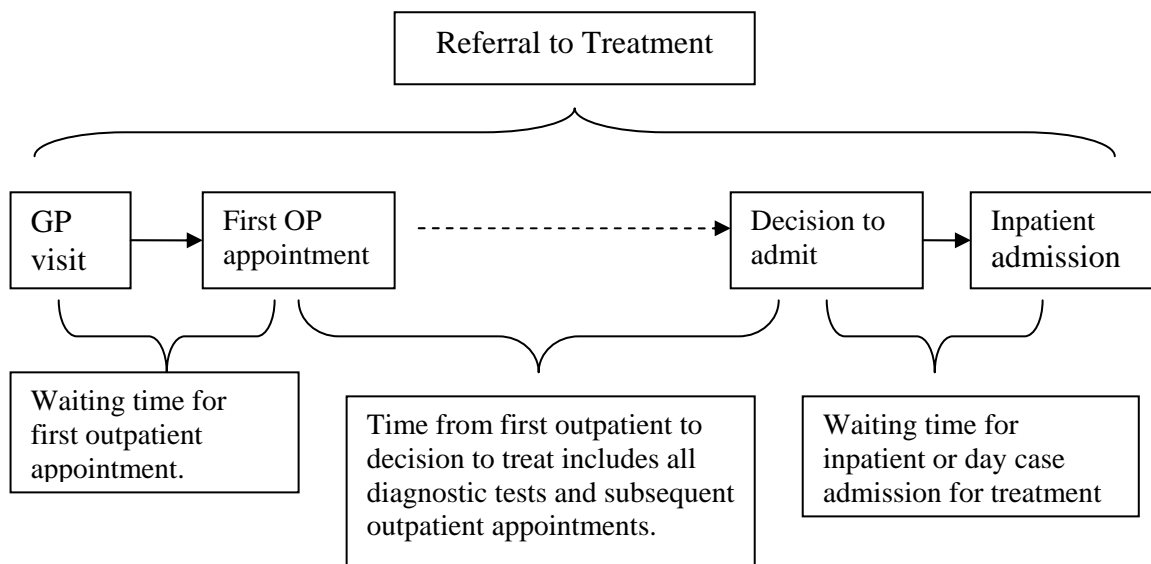
A [user consultation](#) into the future of the collection and publication of this information in early 2010 resulted in the ceasing of the above release after data for March 2010. A data flow is maintained for those areas not covered by Referral to Treatment times reporting and published in the monthly Referral to Treatment times release.

### **How are these waiting times statistics linked?**

Referral to treatment statistics give the full story about the total waiting time experienced from primary care referral to being treated. These statistics are linked to statistics for first outpatient appointments or inpatient or day case admissions and statistics for diagnostic tests and therapy services because each of these recorded waits can make up stages of the total referral to treatment time.

In the past, a patient may have been on one waiting list for an outpatient appointment, another for tests or scans, and yet another for an operation. Achieving waiting time targets for individual stages of care may not reflect a patient's experience of the NHS as a whole. Therefore the aim of driving down the waiting time from referral to treatment is so that the focus of the NHS with regard to waiting times is on the whole patient experience as opposed to just parts of it.

The following diagram shows how referral to treatment times relate to those individual appointments where a patient requires admission to hospital<sup>1</sup>. The outpatient waiting time, from referral to first outpatient appointment, measures the wait at the start of a referral to treatment patient pathway and this is the time to when the first hospital consultation takes place. The inpatient waiting time, from decision to admit to hospital, measures the end of a pathway when the patient needs to be admitted for treatment and is the time to when the patient is admitted. It is these outpatient and inpatient waiting times that have been captured and published for many years.



### When does a waiting time start for NHS hospital services?

A referral to treatment waiting time starts when a referral from a GP or other medical practitioner for hospital treatment is received by the hospital. From October 2010, a direct access referral from primary care for diagnostic and therapy services also starts a referral to treatment waiting time.

Initially a patient can be waiting for a first outpatient appointment or diagnostic or therapy service. A referral to treatment pathway covers the time waited from referral to hospital treatment in the NHS in Wales and includes time spent waiting for any hospital appointments, tests, scans or other procedures that may be needed before being treated.

The specific diagnostic and therapies included in this RTT time are those procedures detailed in the Diagnostic and Therapies statistical release, with the extra inclusion of Pathology and X-rays.

RTT does not include subsequent referrals to other consultants, even if that referral is relevant to the diagnosis and treatment of the condition. A consultant to consultant referral starts a new RTT pathway. The pathway will occur in its entirety within a single provider organisation (Local Health Board), although not specifically within one hospital. A referral between Local Health Boards starts a new RTT pathway.

A patient can be referred for a diagnostic test after the first outpatient appointment and this starts a waiting time for a diagnostic service. After a first consultation a patient could be referred for a therapy service to alleviate some symptoms of the condition before treatment can take place and this starts a waiting time for a therapy service.

From the date a decision is made that admission is required, a patient starts waiting for an inpatient/day-case admission.

For cancer, waiting times can begin at two different points, dependent on which referral route the patient has taken. If a patient is referred from a GP with urgent suspected cancer, then it is this referral date that time to treatment is calculated from. If a patient is not referred via the urgent suspect cancer route, but is subsequently diagnosed with cancer, the date of diagnosis is the date that time to treatment is calculated

<sup>1</sup> The diagram relates to a straightforward patient experience and it is recognised that for some patients the experience is more complicated.

from. The date of diagnosis is defined as: 'The date upon which the decision to treat was confirmed between a designated member of the MDT (multidisciplinary team) and the patient.'

## **How is cardiac referral to treatment times different from general referral to treatment times?**

There are slight differences in the ways that data for cardiac referral to treatment times and referral to treatment times for all other specialties are collected. The main difference is that consultant to consultant referrals are included in the data series for cardiac but not for all other specialties. Unlike general RTT, the pathway for a Cardiac RTT may continue between different provider organisations

## **What are the current targets/standards for waiting times in the NHS in Wales?**

The target relating to referral to treatment times in Wales in 2011-12 is to ensure timely access to planned services, 95% within a maximum referral to treatment time of 26 weeks. The target is assessed using figures for patients waiting to start treatment at the end of the month.

The target refers to all Welsh residents, whether treated in Wales or elsewhere, with the exclusion of cardiology, mental health, palliative care, inpatient/day-case dentistry and self-referral. Data collected and reported in this release refers only to those patients treated or waiting for treatment at Welsh NHS Hospitals.

For patients waiting for diagnostic tests and therapy services, who have not been referred for treatment, the operational standard to be maintained from October 2010 is that the maximum wait for access to specified diagnostic tests is 8 weeks and for specified therapy services it is 14 weeks.

For patients referred to Specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), assessment and any intervention plans required are to be initiated within 16 weeks.

There are operational standards for maximum waiting times for first outpatient appointments and inpatient or day-case admissions for specialties not covered by RTT reporting. These standards give a guide to how long a patient should be waiting and are **not** set targets. The standards are:

14 weeks for inpatient or day case treatment.

10 weeks for a first outpatient appointment (excluding Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services)

For Accident and Emergency Departments the standard states that 95% of new patients should spend no longer than 4 hours in a major A&E department from arrival until admission, transfer or discharge; and 99% of patients spend no longer than 8 hours from arrival until admission, transfer or discharge.

The target relating to **cancer** patients, to be maintained from 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006:

At least 95% of patients referred by their GP with urgent suspected cancer and subsequently diagnosed as such by a Cancer Specialist will start definitive treatment within 62 days of receipt of referral.

At least 98% of patients not referred as urgent suspected cancer but subsequently diagnosed with cancer will start definitive treatment within 31 days of diagnosis, regardless of the referral route.

## **How do I know if targets are being met?**

NHS Organisations have fully met the Referral to Treatment target for patients waiting at the end of the month if they have 95% or more of patients waiting less than 26 weeks to start treatment.

Information on referral to treatment times for patients who have been treated during the month is available but not used to assess the target.

For those not expected to require admission to hospital, it is possible for these patients to meet the referral to treatment target if seen within 26 weeks even though they may not meet the operational standard of 10 weeks for first outpatient appointment.

The cancer waiting times targets for patients newly diagnosed with cancer and treated during the quarter are assessed in two ways:

Of those patients referred urgently with suspected cancer, have 95% or more started treated within 62 days of referral.

Of those patients not referred urgently with suspected cancer but who are subsequently diagnosed with cancer, have 98% or more started treatment within 31 days of diagnosis.

### **What statistics have been available on NHS waiting times over the years?**

The wait for a first outpatient appointment and the wait for an inpatient or day-case admission from the time the decision was made that the patient should be admitted. These were published in the statistical release 'NHS Wales Waiting Times' until May 2010.

Waiting times for selected diagnostic and therapy services were published for the first time in October 2005 in the monthly statistical release 'NHS Wales diagnostic and therapy services waiting times'. Statistics for cancer waiting times have been published since December 2005. At first waiting times were reported for a limited number of cancer sites, whilst improvements were made with the collection of data for other sites. Statistics for all cancer sites were published for the first time in April 2006. Statistics for referral to treatment times have been published for those treated during the month since January 2009 and for those waiting to start to start treatment at month end since December 2009.

### **Further information**

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