

# Waiting times for cancer

A question we repeatedly get asked is: 'How long will I have to wait for.....'

When a cancer diagnosis is suspected, we know how distressing it can be; the wait to be referred; the wait until you get an appointment with a clinician; the wait to be seen; the wait for tests/scans appointments to come through; the wait for surgery. The waiting seems endless. Days can seem like weeks in the period from being told you may have cancer to getting a scan/test to confirm a diagnosis. This can be a really distressing period for the patient and their family, as we all know the sooner a cancer is detected and treated, the better chance the patient has for a successful outcome

## For patients in England

The NHS has set maximum waiting time standards for access to healthcare. In England those for cancer fall under two headings:

*Individual patient rights (as per NHS Constitution and accompanying Handbook)*

*Waiting time standards to which the Department of Health holds individual providers and commissioners to account  
Individual patient rights (NHS Constitution and Handbook)*

The current maximum waiting times for patients in England for cancer care and their rights are set out in the [NHS Constitution](#) and the [Handbook to the NHS Constitution](#).

Patients with suspected cancer have the right to:

- Access certain services commissioned by NHS bodies within maximum waiting times, or for the NHS to take all reasonable steps to offer you a range of suitable alternative providers if this is not possible
- Be seen by a cancer specialist within a maximum of two weeks from an urgent GP referral for suspected cancer.

## Government pledges on waiting times include:

- A maximum one-month (31-day) wait from diagnosis to the first definitive treatment for all cancers.
- A maximum two-month (62-day) wait from urgent referral for suspected cancer to the first definitive treatment for all cancers.
- A maximum two-week wait (2WW) to see a specialist for all patients referred with suspected cancer.

(Source: [NHS in England: Current performance and innovation](#))

## Latest national statistics on waiting times in England

The latest national statistics on waiting times for suspected and diagnosed cancer patients accessing NHS services, produced by NHS England can be accessed at the link below:

[Cancer waiting times](#)

## Concerned about your own waiting time?

If you wish to discuss your own waiting time experience, you should contact your local hospital or GP, which you can find on the [NHS website](#).

## How long should I wait for scan results?

Waiting for scan results can take time and will depend on the type of scan you are having and why you are having it.

Currently there are no limits on how long you must wait for scan results. The Government has set a target to have the results of diagnostic tests ready within 28 days of referral.

TIP: remember to ask your clinician how long before the results are back. If the results are not back within the time indicated or after a couple of weeks ring the clinician's secretary for further advice.

## For patients in Scotland

For patients in Scotland, there are currently two cancer waiting times standards, which are detailed below. From 2011 the cancer waiting time targets, as decided by the Scottish Government, are as follows:

*62-day target from receipt of referral to treatment for all cancers. This applied to each of the following groups:*

- Any patients urgently referred with a suspicion of cancer by their primary care clinician (for example GP) or dentist
- Any screened-positive patients who are referred through a national cancer screening programme (breast, colorectal or cervical)
- Any direct referral to hospital where the signs and symptoms are consistent with the cancer diagnosed as per the Scottish Referral Guidelines (for example self-referral to A&E)

*31-day target from decision to treat until first treatment for all cancers, no matter how patients were referred. For breast cancer, this replaced the previous 31-day diagnosis to treatment target.*

## Latest statistics on waiting times in Scotland

The latest statistics on cancer waiting times in NHS Scotland can be viewed on the [Public Health Scotland website](#).

## Concerned about your own waiting time?

Contact your local Health Board

## For patients in Wales

For patients in Wales, there are currently two cancer waiting times standards, which are detailed below.

The Welsh Government aim is to ensure that all those patients with suspected cancer undertake diagnostic tests as quickly as possible to minimise any anxiety that they may be feeling.

There are two pathways that a patient may follow:

*Patients suspected of having cancer and urgently referred by their GP, should wait no more than 62 days for their treatment to commence*

*Patients who have been newly diagnosed as having cancer, not through a GP referral should start their treatment within 31 days of a decision to treat.*

## Concerned about your own waiting time?

NHS Wales advises you should contact either the Waiting times department in the hospital you have been referred to or the Health Board.

## Latest statistics on waiting times in Wales

The latest statistics on cancer waiting times in NHS Wales can be viewed on the [StatsWales website](#).

## For patients in Northern Ireland

Ministerial Target for Cancer Waiting Times  
The 2016/17 Ministerial target has three components associated with cancer waiting times:

- The Ministerial Target on waiting times for treatment following an urgent referral for suspect cancer states that, 'from April 2016, 95% of patients urgently referred with a suspect cancer should begin their treatment within 62 days'
- The Ministerial Target on waiting times for cancer treatment following a decision to treat states that, 'from April 2016, at least 98% of patients diagnosed with cancer should receive their first definitive treatment within 31 days of a decision to treat'
- The Ministerial Target on waiting times for a first assessment with a breast cancer specialist state that, 'from April 2016, all urgent breast cancer referrals should be seen within 14 days'

## Latest statistics on waiting times in Northern Ireland

The latest statistics on cancer waiting times in Northern Ireland can be viewed on the [Department of Health website](#).

## Concerned about your own waiting time?

Contact your local Health and Social Care Trust or contact the [Patient and Client Council](#).

## Further reading

For additional reading [CRUK have published an excellent report providing an overview of cancer waiting times](#).

## Please help other patients:

Please keep us updated with useful information that will help other cancer patients. You can [email us](#) with your tips so we can regularly add to this resource. or [visit our website](#).

This Help Sheet was written by Julia, a cancer patient, in April 2017.

Thanks to our community for their input, and especially to Julia for her patience and willingness to collate this information to help and support others.

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