

The Impact of Long NHS Waiting Times on Mental Health Outcomes Among Adults Aged 18 and Above in the UK.

1 Introduction / Rationale

Long waits in the NHS system have become a public health priority in the United Kingdom as it undermines the timeliness of diagnosis, consultation and treatment for adults (Limiri, 2025). Waiting times for services could have a detrimental impact on psychological wellbeing, as greater uncertainty and fear/frustration about health could become more significant. Those awaiting diagnosis might experience anxiety about what might be wrong with them, and the stress, emotional upset and depressive symptoms can be a result of delays in treatment (Gagliardi et al., 2021). Moreover, questions and concerns about treatment results can impact daily living, work and quality of life. In UK adults aged 18 years and older, it is therefore necessary to further study this issue, to see what the psychological consequences may be and how these can be reduced to increase patient wellbeing (Jacka et al., 2023).

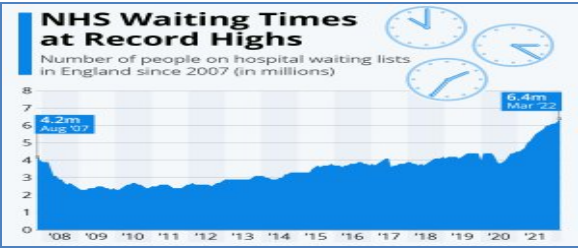


Fig. 1 Hospital waiting list, England, 2007–2022 (millions)



Fig. 2 Waiting list, 2015–2024 (millions)

2 Prevalence

Long Waiting times (Prevalence contd..)

Long waiting times in the NHS are a major health system issue in the UK and have been shown to impact patients' psychological wellbeing. NHS England reported a total waiting list for consultant-led referral-to-treatment pathways for England in August 2026 of 7.19 million pathways, of which around 113,000 of those are more than 52 weeks old (NHS Queue, 2026). These figures illustrate the size of elective healthcare delay, but pathways are not necessarily unique, and the statistics relate to England and not across the UK

Evidence of psychological impact (Contd..)

There's also evidence of psychological impact in responses to national surveys. According to the Office for National Statistics (2024), during the period 4-29 September 2024, 14% of adults in Great Britain indicated that they were waiting for care from the NHS hospital waiting list. Of those who are waiting, 47% indicated suffering from negative effects on mental health and 55% indicated negative effects on physical health. These findings can form an important basis for a potential psychological burden related to poor access to health care.

Effects (Prevalence contd..)

The results, however, indicate associations reported, and do not prove that waiting times have a direct effect on anxiety, stress or depression. Research with the adult population in the UK (18 years or over) is therefore needed to critically explore these relationships and delineate groups who may require more support (Salaheddin and Mason, 2016).

Additional proof (Prevalence contd..)

Additional proof comes from the Care Quality Commission (2025) having surveyed over 14,000 individuals in the year 2025 who used community mental health services in England. The survey, released on 3 April 2025, identified that 42% experienced a decline in their mental health during the wait and 71% among those who waited for more than six months. While these statistics relate to different populations and services, these figures demonstrate that incidences of psychological distress and waiting can be studied.

3 Research Question, Aim and Objectives



Fig. 3 Mental health promotion: prevention, treatment and recovery

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do long NHS waiting times affect mental health outcomes among adults aged 18 and above in the UK?

RESEARCH AIM

To investigate the impact of long NHS waiting times on mental health outcomes among adults aged 18 and above in the UK, with particular attention to anxiety, stress, depression and psychological distress.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1 To examine the relationship between long NHS waiting times and mental health outcomes among adults aged 18 and above in the UK.
- 2 To identify the key mental health challenges, including anxiety, stress and depressive symptoms, experienced by adults who face long NHS waiting times.
- 3 To explore how the duration of NHS waiting times may influence the severity of reported mental health difficulties among adults.
- 4 To evaluate existing evidence on strategies that could help reduce the negative mental health effects associated with long NHS waiting times

4 Research Impact

The importance of this research is its potential contribution towards knowledge of the psychological wellbeing of UK adults aged 18+, in relation to the impact of long waiting times for NHS treatment. The findings, based on survey results on anxiety, stress, depressive symptoms and psychological distress, could undergo analysis to learn how to implement more practical strategies to ensure patients' own experiences are better while they await diagnosis or treatment.

Patient Support

The study might emphasise the need for easy access to psychological support for patients who are in uncertainty and emotional distress (Liu et al., 2025). NHS services might consider providing updates on waiting lists, self-help information and signposting to counselling and information on expected treatment times. These interventions could minimise misunderstandings and contribute to patient anxiety reduction whilst waiting for treatment (Luggar-Schmit, 2024)

Healthcare Professionals' Practice

The results may provide an incentive for health professionals to acknowledge psychological distress as one of the potential outcomes of delayed treatment (Lin et al., 2021). GPs, nurses, and other health professionals may consider integrating short mental health and wellbeing assessments in patient reviews, detecting patients who might need more support and referring accordingly (Kenwright et al., 2024). Such a strategy could foster compassionate and patient-centred medical care.

NHS Service Planning

The research could help NHS managers and policymakers to see the broader implications of waiting lists, not just on physical outcomes (Murphy et al., 2024). Information related to psychological challenges might be used in planning around the allocation of resources, staffing, waiting lists, and integrated mental health care. It might also be useful to identify specific patient group(s) at risk, so that services can prioritise the provision of the right support (De Rezende and Melleiro, 2022).

Strategies to Reduce Psychological Burden

The research may uncover methods to reduce psychological burden, such as providing clear communication, online support resources, or psychological interventions, among other items, and streamlining healthcare interactions (Zhiyu, Wentian and Ruizi, 2022). But these interventions must be supplemented with, not a substitute for, interventions to reduce waiting time.

References

Care Quality Commission (2025). High demand, long waits, and insufficient support, mean people with mental health issues still not getting the support they need - care quality commission. [online] Cqc.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.cqc.org.uk/press-release/high-demand-long-waits-and-insufficient-support-mean-people-mental-health-issues> [Accessed 19 Oct. 2026].
De Rezende, H. and Melleiro, M.M. (2022). Towards safe patient identification practices: The development of a conceptual framework from the findings of a Ph.D. project. *The Open Nursing Journal*, 16(1). doi:10.2174/18744346-v16-e2209290.
Gagliardi, A.R., Yip, C.Y.Y., Irish, J., Wright, F.C., Rubin, B., Ross, H., Green, R., Abbey, S., McAndrews, M.P. and Stewart, D.E. (2021). The psychological burden of waiting for procedures and patient-centred strategies that could support the mental health of wait-listed patients and caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review. *Health Expectations*, 24(3), pp.978–990. doi:10.1111/hex.13241.
Jackson, S.E., Brown, J., Shahab, L., McNeill, A., Munafò, M.R. and Brose, L. (2023). Trends in psychological distress among adults in England, 2020-2022. *JAMA Network Open*, [online] 6(7), p.e2321959. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.21959.

Kenwright, M., Fairclough, P., McDonald, J. and Pickford, L. (2024). Effectiveness of Community Mental Health Nurses in an integrated primary care service: An observational cohort study. *International Journal of Nursing Studies Advances*, [online] 6, pp.100182–100182. doi:10.1016/j.ijnsa.2024.100182.
Limiri, D. (2025). The impact of long wait times on patient health outcomes: The growing NHS crisis. [online] *premier journal of public health*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389401280_The_Impact_of_Long_Wait_Times_on_Patient_Health_Outcomes_The_Growing_NHS_Crisis [Accessed 19 Oct. 2026].
Lin, C.Y., Dracup, K., Pelter, M.M., Biddle, M.J. and Moser, D.K. (2021). Association of psychological distress with reasons for delay in seeking medical care in rural patients with worsening heart failure symptoms. *The Journal of Rural Health*, [online] 38(4), pp.713–720. doi:10.1111/jrh.12573.
Liu, S., Hu, Y., Pfaff, H., Lei, X., Qi, Z. and Feng, X. (2025). Barriers and facilitators to seeking psychological support among healthcare professionals: A qualitative study using the theoretical domains framework. *BMC Public Health*, 25(1). doi:10.1186/s12889-025-21912-3.
Luggar-Schmit, K. (2024). Nursing interventions: How to reduce anxiety in patients. *Nursingopen*, [online] 10(1), pp.1-10. Available at: <https://nursingopen.com/reduce-anxiety-in-patients> [Accessed 19 Oct. 2026].

Murphy, R.P., Taaffe, C., Byrne, M., Delaney, L., Lunn, P.D., Robertson, D.A., Ryan, H. and Wood, A.M. (2024). Improving the management of hospital waiting lists by using nudges in letters: A randomised controlled trial. *Social Science & Medicine*, [online] 361, p.117343. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.117343.
NHS Queue (2026). NHSQueue. [online] NHSQueue. Available at: <https://www.nhsqueue.co.uk/> [Accessed 19 Oct. 2026].
Office for National Statistics (2024). Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain. [online] Ons.gov.uk. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/publicopinionsandsocialtrends/greatbritain/september2024> [Accessed 19 Oct. 2026].
Salaheddin, K. and Mason, B. (2016). Identifying barriers to mental health help-seeking among young adults in the UK: A cross-sectional survey. *British Journal of General Practice*, 66(651), pp.e686-e692. doi:10.3399/bjgp16x687313.
Suhaani Sathish (2025). UK NHS healthcare system differences 2026: Medicine interview guide. [online] TheUKCATPeople. Available at: <https://www.theukcatpeople.co.uk/post/uk-healthcare-system-differences-nhs-england-wales-scotland-ni-interview-guide> [Accessed 19 Oct. 2026].
Zhiyu, Y., Wentian, L. and Ruizi, Z. (2022). Online psychosocial interventions for improving mental health in people during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 316. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2022.08.023.