



Hertfordshire

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## EXCLUSIVE

## A&E crisis: Data show 13 386 patients waited over three days in England's emergency departments as patients say "they'd rather die at home"

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More than 13 000 patients in England waited at least three days for treatment in NHS accident and emergency departments last year, *The BMJ* can reveal.

They were among almost 500 000 patients who spent over 24 hours in A&E departments in 2025 before being admitted, transferred, or discharged.

Numbers of patients spending at least a day in A&E have risen by a third since 2023, despite a recent claim by the health and social care secretary, Wes Streeting, that the government was "moving away from unacceptable corridor care."<sup>1</sup>

A freedom of information (FOI) request by *The BMJ* also showed that figures for January 2026—the latest data available—were by far the worst for any month in the past five years.

A total of 66 847 patients spent a whole day in type 1 A&E departments (consultant led, 24 hour departments) that month—nearly 1 in 20 of all attendances—including 9379 who were there for more than 48 hours.

Experts warned that these excessively long waits were harming patients "across the country" and risking moral injury among staff. They also said that this level of severity of extreme A&E stays was a recent phenomenon almost unheard of before the covid pandemic.

Earlier this month Streeting admitted he was "ashamed" of corridor care and reiterated his pledge to end the practice across the NHS by the end of 2029.<sup>2 3</sup>

But *The BMJ*'s figures highlight the scale of the challenge ahead, with a total of 493 751 patients spending at least 24 hours in type 1 emergency departments in 2025.

This was up from 487 608 in 2024 and 377 986 in 2023.

These patients included 61 009 who waited at least 48 hours last year, of whom 13 386 were there for 72 hours or more, the NHS England data show.

While the number of 72 hour waits has fallen from a peak of 19 579 in 2023, experts said the overall issue of extreme A&E waits was getting worse.

James Gagg, vice president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, told *The BMJ*, "When we look at 24 hour waits, this isn't a problem related to a few trusts, this is something that's experienced by all trusts, all of the year."

He added that a wait of "24 hours was pretty much unheard of if you go back prior to 2020. These 24 hour waits are very much a phenomenon of the last few years."

Referring to long waits more generally, he said, "This is where harm is occurring; this is where we know patients have worse mortality due to the delays that occur in care."

Research has shown that patients are more likely to die if they spend more than six or 12 hours in A&E departments before being admitted.<sup>4 5</sup>

Mumtaz Patel, president of the Royal College of Physicians, told *The BMJ*, "You see the same patients, waiting in the same place . . . Some patients, you think the need for them to be moving to a better environment is crucial, and you're trying really, really hard."

"I've heard of patients who say they'd rather die at home than come into hospital and be waiting."

Danielle Jefferies, senior analyst at the health think tank the King's Fund, told *The BMJ*, "This is one of the most visible and worrying signs that a staff member can see that the hospital healthcare system isn't working."

"It's a real indicator that something is wrong, not just in A&E but in the wider healthcare system."

Experts also told *The BMJ* that the traditional "winter pressures" no longer abate in the spring but continue year round, a pattern supported by the data. For example, the numbers of patients waiting 24 hours or more in A&E in April (38 765) and May (36 609) last year were more than double the number recorded for January 2022 (15 225).

Patel added, "Spring used to come round and we used to feel a sense of relief. Now it's every time of the year, even when we've reported for corridor care for August, when traditionally people are on holiday and not wanting to come in . . . even then it's so busy."

"It's systemic, across the board."

Experts also told *The BMJ* that many patients waiting more than 24 hours were those with more complex cases and who would often be waiting in corridors or other makeshift areas.

NHS England recently defined "corridor care" as patients spending 45 minutes or more in a corridor or other clinically inappropriate area.

The organisation has also promised to start publishing monthly figures on corridor care from May as part of the government's pledge to end the practice by the end of this parliament, in 2029.

Earlier this month Streeting announced he would be sending in expert teams into the worst affected trusts, although experts and groups including the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and the Royal College of Physicians said the plan would fall short of tackling the crisis.<sup>2</sup>

NHS England was contacted for comment.

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