

Millions have to visit GP four times to get referral

Kat Lay Health Editor

More than two million patients a year make four or more visits to their GP before they get a referral, [Healthwatch England](#) has warned.

Research by the patient watchdog revealed a “hidden waiting list”. It said: “People wait for a GP appointment; they wait for their GP to tell them they will be referred; they wait for the hospital to confirm that referral; and then they join a hospital waiting list.

“NHS statistics monitor only the hospital waiting list, leaving the steps between getting a GP referral and a letter confirming a hospital appointment as a dangerous ‘blind spot’.”

Some 18 per cent of adults had attended four or more GP appointments before the doctor gave them a referral.

Across the country this would translate to more than two million people in the past year. And 11 per cent had waited four or more months after their first GP appointment to be referred to hospital, mental health or community services.

A report, based on interviews with more than 1,500 people, found that nearly one in three referrals did not progress directly to a hospital appointment or joining a waiting list. The problem was worst for people needing mental health referrals.

Louise Ansari, chief executive at [Healthwatch England](#), said: “Our new research shows how difficult it can be for many people to get a hospital or specialist care referral.

“While the NHS monitors hospital waiting lists, the number of people who wait for a GP referral remains unknown to the health system. As well as looking at this ‘hidden’ waiting list, healthcare leaders need to address delays in progressing referrals.

“People need to be given clear information about their referral process and be supported while they wait.”

NHS England referred a request for comment to the Department of Health

and Social Care.

Katie Hitchcock, 24, from Tooting in south London, faced challenges getting a referral for endometriosis treatment.

She had been experiencing abdominal pain for a few years. At times it was so bad she missed work and on one occasion, she went to A&E. Her GP had told her the pain was nothing to worry about. She tried to see other GPs, but they would not write a referral. “They told me things like it’s chronic pain or I just need to lose some weight. Once they said ‘you just have to live with it.’”

After “months and months” of GP appointments, she pushed her surgery to write a gynaecology referral specifically for endometriosis. She is due to have surgery this month.