

Is Britain's health service, a much-loved national treasure, falling apart?

Most winters, headlines warn that Britain's National Health Service (NHS) is at "breaking point." The alarms sound over and over and over again. But the current crisis has set warning bells ringing louder than before.

"This time feels different," said Peter Neville, a doctor who has worked in the NHS since 1989. "It's never been as bad as this."

5 Scenes that would until recently have been unthinkable have now become commonplace. Hospitals are running well over capacity. Many patients don't get treated in wards, but in the back of ambulances or in corridors, waiting rooms and cupboards – or not at all. "It's like a war zone," an NHS worker at a hospital in Liverpool told CNN.

10 These stories are borne out by the data. In December, 54,000 people in England had to wait more than 12 hours for an emergency admission. The figure was virtually zero before the pandemic, according to data from NHS England. The average wait time for an ambulance to attend a "category 2" condition – like a stroke or heart attack – exceeded 90 minutes. The target is 18 minutes. There were 1,474 (20%) more excess deaths in the week ending December 30 than the 5-year average.

15 Ambulance staff and nurses have staged a series of strikes over pay and working conditions, with the latest walkout by ambulance workers happening Monday. More are planned for the coming weeks. The chief executive of the NHS Confederation, which represents NHS organizations in England, wrote to the government on the eve of an ambulance strike last month to warn of NHS leaders' concerns that they "cannot guarantee patient safety" that day. In response, a government health minister advised the public to avoid "risky activity."

20 While the NHS has suffered crises before, this winter has brought a new reality: In Britain, people can no longer rely on getting healthcare in an emergency.

Founded shortly after World War II, the NHS is treated with an almost religious reverence by many. Britons danced for it during the 2012 London Olympics and clapped for it during the pandemic. "Our NHS" is a source of national pride.

25 Now, it is coming unstuck. There has long been an implicit contract between British people and the state: Pay taxes and National Insurance contributions in return for a health service that is free at the point of use.

But, with the tax burden on track to reach its highest sustained level since the NHS was founded, Britons are paying more and more for a service they increasingly cannot access as quickly as they need.

30 Some of these strains can be seen elsewhere in Europe. Doctors in both France and Spain have held strikes in recent weeks, as many countries face the same problems of providing care to an increasingly aging population – when inflation is at its highest level in decades.

Yet there are fears that the NHS is in worse shape than its international peers, and CNN spoke with experts who said they fear they're witnessing the "collapse" of the service.

By Christian Edwards, on *CNN*, Jan. 2023