

The UK's stance on **medical cannabis NHS** prescriptions often seems shrouded in confusion. Headlines trumpet "medical cannabis now legal" while patients struggle to obtain a single NHS prescription. So, what does *legal* mean here? What changed in 2018, and what does it actually take to get a prescription through the NHS? This post cuts through the jargon and explores **UK medical cannabis access** the way a patient needs to understand it.



What Changed in 2018: Cannabis Rescheduling

Before November 2018, cannabis-based products for medicinal use in the UK were largely illegal, falling under class B drugs with no real pathway for prescribers. Then came a landmark change.

- **November 1, 2018:** Cannabis and cannabis-derived products were reclassified as Schedule 2 drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001.
- This allowed specialist doctors to prescribe cannabis-based medicines legally for the first time in England, Wales, and Scotland.
- The change was largely driven by high-profile cases, such as that of Billy Caldwell and Alfie Dingley, children with severe epilepsy whose families campaigned tirelessly.

Want to know something interesting? in short, after 2018, it became possible for certain nhs doctors—specialists only—to legally prescribe medical cannabis, but it didn't mean prescriptions became widely available overnight.

Legal Prescribing vs NHS Funding: The Financial Catch

One key point patients often miss: **legal to prescribe does NOT mean the prescription is freely available or routinely funded on the NHS.**

Here's the difference:

Legal Prescribing Specialist doctors can legally prescribe medical cannabis products. The NHS is not obliged to pay for these prescriptions, and most do not get routine approval. Patients can obtain cannabis-based medicines if prescribed and dispensed privately. **NHS funding** requires approval via regional NHS commissioning groups, which are currently very restrictive. Prescriptions are controlled under strict legal frameworks (Schedule 2).

Most NHS trusts and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) have not included cannabis-based medicines in their formularies.

So, if you see a website vergemagazine.co.uk or clinic saying “medical cannabis is legal on the NHS,” what they usually mean is it *can* be prescribed by specialists, *not* that it’s routinely available or funded. For most patients, this distinction is crucial.

The Specialist-Only Prescribing Rule

Another major hurdle: **only certain specialists can prescribe medical cannabis products under the NHS.** General practitioners (GPs) cannot initiate these prescriptions.

The specialists permitted to prescribe include:

- Neurologists
- Oncologists
- Pain specialists
- Paediatricians (in some cases)
- Psychiatrists (in very restricted situations)

To even be considered for a cannabis-based medicine on the NHS, the patient must have exhausted licensed treatment options and have their case reviewed by a specialist trained and comfortable in prescribing Schedule 2 cannabis products.

So the majority of patient enquiries fall at this early stage. Many specialists have little personal experience with these products and remain cautious, or simply do not view cannabis-based medicines as proven first-line or even second-line treatment options.

Unlicensed Cannabis-Based Medicines and NHS Caution

Most cannabis-based medicines prescribed in the UK are *unlicensed* medicines. That means they haven't gone through the full regulatory approval process by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) for all indications.

Because of this:

- NHS prescribers must assess whether using these unlicensed products is in the patient’s best interest.
- Prescribing unlicensed medicines carries additional risks and responsibilities; clinics and hospitals have strict governance procedures.
- Regional NHS bodies often consider the evidence insufficient to routinely fund cannabis-based medicines, even for conditions where clinical trials exist.

Simply put, the NHS world remains very cautious, so prescribing these medicines via NHS routes is the exception rather than the rule.

How Patients End Up Getting Medical Cannabis in the UK

Given the above constraints, many patients turn to private clinics for medical cannabis prescriptions. Websites like medicalcannabis.co.uk provide directories and comparison tools for these clinics.

However, private prescriptions can be expensive, and the cost of cannabis-based products varies widely, with no standardised NHS pricing. No specific prices were stated in available official sources, so if you do find a price listing, make sure it's quoted exactly from the source.

For patients new to this topic, Releaf's explainer on NHS prescribing is a great accessible overview, clarifying what kind of cannabis prescriptions NHS patients could expect and what they likely won't.

Summary: What Does This Mean for Patients?

- 1. Medical cannabis became legal to prescribe in the UK in 2018, but it's still tightly controlled and specialist-only.**
- 2. Getting a cannabis-based medicine on the NHS is very rare: most patients must go private unless their specialist pursues an NHS funding application.**
- 3. GPs cannot prescribe medical cannabis, so your journey starts with a specialist familiar with these medications.**
- 4. Because many cannabis products are unlicensed, NHS bodies remain cautious, with limited routine funding.**
- 5. For many patients, private clinics listed on sites like [medicalcannabis.co.uk](https://www.medicalcannabis.co.uk) are the practical route, but costs are out-of-pocket.**

Understanding these realities is essential for anyone hoping to explore medical cannabis as a treatment option in the UK. The situation continues to evolve as more clinical evidence emerges and policies adapt, but for now, NHS cannabis prescriptions remain an exception, not the norm.

If you're considering medical cannabis, start by speaking openly with your specialist and use reliable resources to understand your options and any associated costs.

