

Since the UK government rescheduled cannabis-based products for medicinal use in November 2018, many patients have asked: how do I get a medical cannabis prescription? What's the usual pathway, and is the NHS likely to cover it?

In this article, we'll explain what changed in 2018, the difference between NHS funding and legal prescribing, the specialist-only rules for doctors, and why many cannabis-based medicines remain "unlicensed" with caution from NHS bodies. We'll also highlight helpful resources including [medicalcannabis.co.uk](https://www.medicalcannabis.co.uk), a clinic directory, and [releaf.co.uk](https://www.releaf.co.uk), an explainer hub.



2018 Rescheduling: What Changed for Medical Cannabis?

Before November 2018, cannabis products were illegal to prescribe in the UK. This meant no healthcare professional in the NHS or private sector could legally prescribe cannabis-derived medicines. Everything was off-limits.

But, in November 2018, the government rescheduled cannabis-based products for medicinal use. Specifically, they moved cannabis from a Schedule 1 drug to Schedule 2 under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations. In simple terms: doctors could now legally prescribe cannabis-based products.



Key takeaway for patients: Before 2018, cannabis medicines were illegal to prescribe here. Now they're legal but with strict controls.

What rescheduling did NOT do:

- It did not mean the NHS would automatically fund these medicines.
- It did not mean any doctor could prescribe them – specialist-only prescribing rules apply.
- It did not mean all cannabis-based medicines were licensed or approved by UK regulators.

The Legal Prescribing Landscape

It's important to understand the difference between *legal prescribing* and *NHS funding*. Just because a medicine is legal to prescribe does not mean the NHS will pay for it.

- **Legal Prescribing:** Cannabis-based products for medicinal use are legal to prescribe by doctors with appropriate specialist qualifications.
- **NHS Funding:** NHS England and local Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) decide whether to fund these prescriptions. The vast majority do not routinely fund medical cannabis prescriptions.

This means many patients seeking medical cannabis prescription are referred to **private clinics** if they want a prescription that they pay for themselves.

Specialist-Only Prescribing

Unlike many medications, medical cannabis [follow this link](#) can only be prescribed by a specialist doctor on the General Medical Council (GMC) specialist register. Simply put, GPs cannot prescribe these medicines unless advised to do so by an authorised specialist.

Specialists typically come from fields like neurology, pain management, or palliative care. The idea is that only doctors with specialist expertise should assess patients for these complex medicines.

In practice: Most initial assessments leading to a cannabis prescription happen at private medical cannabis clinics where specialists conduct a detailed review of medical history, previous treatments, and suitability for cannabis-based products.

Unlicensed Cannabis-Based Medicines and NHS Caution

Most cannabis-based products prescribed in the UK remain *unlicensed*. This means they do not have marketing authorisation from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), the UK's medicine regulator.

The NHS is cautious about funding unlicensed medicines and usually requires robust clinical evidence, cost-effectiveness data, and clear commissioning pathways before funding prescriptions. To date, this evidence base for cannabis medicines remains limited or uncertain. NHS England's guidance on cannabis prescribing explicitly states that "unlicensed cannabis-based products should not be prescribed routinely."

For patients, this means:

- Even if your specialist prescribes medical cannabis, the NHS probably won't fund it.
- You may need to pay through a private clinic if you want a prescription, and subsequently buy your medicine from a pharmacy or a specialist supplier.

The Usual Pathway to a Private Medical Cannabis Prescription in the UK

Here's the typical patient journey if you want to access medical cannabis via a private clinic in the UK:

1. Find a reputable private medical cannabis clinic:

- Use directories like [medicalcannabis.co.uk](https://www.medicalcannabis.co.uk) to compare clinics offering assessments and prescriptions in your condition.
- Check credentials, reviews, and what specialties the clinic's doctors hold.

2. Book a medical cannabis assessment UK:

- The specialist doctor will review your medical history, current treatments, and discuss potential benefits and risks of cannabis-based medicines.
- You'll likely need to provide previous medical records, detailing your diagnosis and the treatments you've tried.

3. Specialist considers if cannabis-based medicine is appropriate:

- The doctor uses clinical judgement and available evidence, following guidelines from bodies like NICE (which currently do not routinely recommend cannabis medicines).
- If they decide to prescribe, they'll write a private prescription.

4. Purchase and access medicine:

- You obtain the prescribed cannabis medicine from a specialist pharmacy or supplier. Be aware these products are often costly and not NHS-funded.
- Costs vary widely and no specific prices were stated in our sources. Always seek exact quotes from clinics and pharmacies.

5. Follow-up and monitoring:

- The specialist clinic will typically offer follow-up appointments to monitor your response and adjust doses.

Why Many Patients Turn to Private Clinics

The NHS prescribing of medical cannabis remains rare due to restrictive commissioning policies. Some high-profile cases in specialist centres have led to prescriptions, but widespread NHS access is currently very limited.

Private clinics have stepped in to fill this gap. Clinics usually employ specialists allowed to prescribe, offer timely consultations, and manage the entire process from assessment to dose adjustments.

Note on costs: Because these are private services, expect consultation fees plus medicine costs. While some marketing claims suggest “affordable” prescriptions, the NHS does not set or regulate private pricing.

Additional Resources

- medicalcannabis.co.uk – A useful directory and clinic comparison platform to find private medical cannabis clinics in the UK
- releaf.co.uk – Explainer hub with clear, patient-friendly guides about medical cannabis laws and access in the UK

Summary

Step Summary 2018 Rescheduling Allowed legal prescribing of medical cannabis by specialists but did not guarantee NHS funding. Legal vs NHS Funding Prescribing is legal but NHS rarely funds cannabis medicines; most prescriptions are private. Specialist Prescribing Only specialists on GMC specialist register can prescribe medical cannabis for complex cases. Unlicensed Medicines & NHS Caution Most cannabis medicines lack UK licensing; NHS cautious due to limited evidence. Private Clinic Pathway Assessment by private specialist → prescription → medicine purchase → monitoring Helpful Resources medicalcannabis.co.uk, releaf.co.uk

In short: If you want a medical cannabis prescription in the UK, you’ll usually need to see a specialist—most often through a private medical cannabis clinic—understand the legal but limited funding landscape, and be prepared for ongoing monitoring and costs.

For anyone considering this route, make sure to do your research, verify the clinic's credentials, and understand what the private pathway entails. The recent changes in law have opened the door, but NHS access remains a long way behind the private market.