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If you've come across the term **"unlicensed cannabis-based product"** in conversations about treatments, you're not alone in wondering what it really means—especially when it's linked to complex conditions like *autism* or *epilepsy*. This phrase crops up a lot in media reports, online forums, and even some <https://londoninsider.co.uk/medical-cannabis-and-autism-what-london-families-should-know/> healthcare consultations, but the details behind it are often misunderstood or glossed over.

As someone who's spent over a decade reading through research, NICE technology appraisals, and health policy guidance, I want to explain this term clearly, address common confusions around autism and co-occurring conditions, and highlight what the NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) and GMC (General Medical Council) say about these treatments. Whether you're a family member navigating specialist prescribing or just curious about the evidence, this blog post is for you.

## Unpacking the Term: What Is an "Unlicensed Medicine"?

First, it helps to separate the phrase into two parts:



- **Medicine/Product:** In this context, it usually means a cannabis-based product—a preparation containing cannabinoids such as cannabidiol (CBD) and/or tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).
- **Unlicensed:** This means the medicine does not have official authorization (a *marketing authorization*) from the UK regulatory agency (MHRA) for the specific condition or even for general use.

Put simply, an *unlicensed cannabis-based product* is a cannabis-derived medicine supplied without formal approval from UK regulators for the treatment it's being prescribed for. These products can come in various forms like oils, capsules, or sprays.

*Important:* Being unlicensed doesn't mean they're unsafe or illegal. It means the company that makes or distributes the medicine hasn't completed the full licensing process—usually because that process is lengthy, expensive, and challenging when scientific evidence is limited.

## Why Does That Matter to You?

- **Specialist Prescribing:** Only specialists (doctors with appropriate expertise) are typically allowed to prescribe unlicensed cannabis-based products. This is because they need thorough understanding of the product, its potential benefits and risks, and close monitoring requirements.
- **Monitoring Requirements:** Since these are not licensed products with straightforward guidance, the prescriber must monitor effects carefully, looking for both improvements and adverse effects—sometimes using standardized assessments.
- **Liability and Consent:** The prescriber needs to discuss with you or your child's carers that the treatment is unlicensed, explain what that means, and get informed consent.

## Autism and Co-Occurring Conditions: Clearing Up Common Confusion

You might have heard claims online or elsewhere that cannabis-based products “treat autism.” But it's crucial to be precise about the **symptom or condition being targeted**.

**Autism** itself is not currently on NICE's list of conditions treated by licensed or recommended cannabis-based medicines. Instead, some people with autism also experience co-occurring conditions such as:



- Epilepsy (notably drug-resistant forms)
- Anxiety
- Sleep difficulties
- Severe behavioural challenges

Many claims about treating “autism” with cannabis products are actually about addressing these associated symptoms or co-occurring conditions, especially epilepsy. That distinction is vital.

The NICE guidance NG128, Autism spectrum disorder in under 19s: recognition, referral and diagnosis, doesn't recommend cannabis-based treatments for autism symptoms themselves.

## What Does NICE Say About Cannabis-Based Products?

NICE acts as an independent body providing evidence-based guidance to the NHS and the public. Their guidance library includes recommendations on the use of new and existing treatments, considering clinical effectiveness,

safety, and cost-effectiveness.

## NICE's Position on Cannabis-Based Medicines

Condition Recommendation on Cannabis-Based Products Autism No recommendation; cannabis-based products are *not* approved as treatment Narrow Epilepsy Indications (Dravet and Lennox-Gastaut syndromes) NICE recommends *licensed* cannabidiol preparations as add-on therapy under specialist supervision Other Epilepsies or Behavioural Problems Evidence is limited; products are not generally recommended

Given the narrow scope of NICE's recommendations—mainly for *licensed* cannabidiol (CBD) medicines in Dravet syndrome and Lennox-Gastaut syndrome—claims about treating other conditions with cannabis products lack strong evidence and regulatory endorsement.

## Why Only These Epilepsy Conditions?

Dravet and Lennox-Gastaut syndromes are rare, severe forms of epilepsy starting in childhood. Clinical trials have demonstrated that a licensed CBD medicine (Epidyolex) can reduce seizure frequency in these cases. This robust evidence allowed NICE to endorse these for specialist use.

Outside these particular epilepsies, there are no large-scale, high-quality studies proving consistent benefits, so NICE guidance does not recommend cannabis-based products.

## Limits of the Evidence and Placebo Effects

When evaluating any treatment, understanding *how strong and reliable the evidence is* makes a big difference. With cannabis-based products, the evidence base has a few key limitations:

1. **Small or preliminary studies:** Many studies have few participants or use designs where it's hard to separate real treatment effects from chance.
2. **Placebo and expectation effects:** Particularly in behavioural or subjective symptoms, perceived changes may come from the belief that a new treatment will help—not the treatment itself.
3. **Heterogeneous products:** The cannabis products used vary widely in their cannabinoid composition, dose, and purity, making it hard to compare results or generalize findings.

Because of these points, specialists and organisations like NICE require rigorous randomized controlled trials (RCTs) before endorsing treatments widely.

## Specialist Prescribing and Monitoring: What to Expect

Because unlicensed cannabis-based products aren't standard NHS medicines, specialists who consider them must follow strict guidelines:

- **Assessment:** Thorough clinical evaluation and confirmation of diagnosis, usually after other licensed treatments have been tried.
- **Informed Consent:** Explanation of unlicensed status, uncertainties about benefits and risks, and the need for monitoring.
- **Prescribing:** As unlicensed medicines, these products should only be prescribed by consultants or relevant specialists familiar with the condition and product.
- **Monitoring:** Regular follow-ups to assess treatment effects and side effects, ideally using measurable outcomes rather than vague observations like "seems calmer."

- **Documentation:** Detailed records to support safety, effectiveness, and facilitate future care decisions.

This robust approach helps counter the risks from incomplete evidence and variability in product quality.

## Final Thoughts: What You Should Remember

- An “unlicensed cannabis-based product” is a medicine without official UK marketing approval for a specific use; this requires careful specialist prescribing and monitoring.
- Autism itself is *not* currently treated by these products according to NICE guidance; attention should focus on co-occurring symptoms or conditions.
- Licensed cannabidiol products are only recommended for narrow epilepsy indications (Dravet, Lennox-Gastaut syndromes) under specialist care.
- Evidence for other indications remains limited, and placebo effects or anecdotal observations shouldn’t be taken as proof of benefit.
- The GMC and NICE guidance emphasise that prescribing these products requires thorough informed consent and close monitoring.

If you or someone you care for is being considered for an unlicensed cannabis-based product, make sure to have a detailed conversation with a specialist experienced in the relevant condition and the product’s specifics. Reliable information and appropriate monitoring are key to safe, responsible use.

For further reading:

- NICE Guidance on Autism Spectrum Disorder
- NICE Technology Appraisal on Cannabidiol for Epilepsy
- GMC Guidance on Prescribing Unlicensed Medicines

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