

Since the rescheduling of cannabis-based products for medicinal use in 2018, many people in the UK have hoped this would open the [vergemagazine.co.uk](https://www.vergemagazine.co.uk) door to easier access to medical cannabis on the NHS. But the reality is far more complex. Confusion often arises between what's legal, what's funded, and who can prescribe. This article cuts through the jargon to explain, in plain terms, how **medical cannabis NHS** access actually works in the UK, what the rules are, and why most patients still struggle to get treatment on the NHS for now.

The 2018 Rescheduling: What Changed and What Didn't

In November 2018, the Home Office rescheduled cannabis-based products for medicinal use so that specialist doctors in the UK could prescribe them legally. This was a landmark shift because before then, no UK doctor could prescribe medical cannabis legally; patients were forced to buy from unregulated sources or pay privately.



What this rescheduling actually meant:

- Medical cannabis products became legal to prescribe under Schedule 2 controlled drugs regulations.
- Specialist doctors (not GPs) gained the authority to prescribe cannabis-based products where other treatment options hadn't worked.
- Doctors could prescribe licensed and unlicensed cannabis-based medicines, but subject to strict clinical guidelines.

What the 2018 change did NOT mean:

- It did not mean widespread NHS funding or easy access for most patients.
- GPs still cannot prescribe medical cannabis; only specialists can.
- There's no guarantee that doctors will be willing or able to prescribe these medicines, even if legal.

Legal Prescribing vs NHS Funding: Why You Can Be Prescribed but Not Funded

It's important to understand that legal prescribing and NHS funding are two separate issues. Just because specialist doctors can legally prescribe medical cannabis, it doesn't mean the NHS will pay for it. The NHS operates

under strict budgetary and clinical guidelines, and so far, **most medical cannabis products are not routinely funded by the NHS.**

In practical terms, this means:



1. You can be prescribed medical cannabis legally within the NHS system.
2. The prescription may not be funded by the NHS, requiring patients to pay out of pocket or privately.
3. Many specialists and NHS trusts are cautious or reluctant to prescribe because of limited evidence or funding policies.

This is why many patients seeking medical cannabis end up looking for private prescriptions. Sites like medicalcannabis.co.uk provide clinic directories and comparisons for private medical cannabis consultations and prescriptions.

Specialist-Only Prescribing Rules: Why GPs Are Not Involved

The legal framework is clear: **only specialists on the General Medical Council's specialist register can prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use.** GPs are currently not authorised to do so. This is because prescribing medical cannabis is considered complex — it often involves patients with severe treatment-resistant conditions or those trying other therapies unsuccessfully.

Key points about specialist prescribing:

- Specialists usually come from neurology, pain medicine, palliative care, or psychiatry.
- They must have experience managing complex, treatment-resistant cases before prescribing cannabis products.
- They are expected to follow NICE guidelines and hospital policies carefully.
- This limits the number of prescribers and thus the volume of NHS cannabis prescriptions.

As a result, access is tightly controlled, and the vast majority of NHS patients have no direct route to get medical cannabis via their GP or standard referrals.

Unlicensed Cannabis-Based Medicines and NHS Caution

Unlike many medicines on the NHS, the majority of cannabis-based products are unlicensed medicines. This means they have not undergone the usual rigorous clinical trials and approval processes to get a UK marketing authorisation. Licensed products such as nabiximols (Sativex) exist but have narrow indications.

Because of this, the NHS exercises extreme caution in funding unlicensed medicines, including most cannabis-based products. To prescribe unlicensed medicines on the NHS, clinicians must:

- Demonstrate that licensed treatments have been tried and failed.
- Have clear evidence to support that the unlicensed product is appropriate for the patient's condition.
- Follow strict prescribing protocols and get trust-level approval.

This caution explains why even though cannabis-based products are legal to prescribe, NHS doctors are often reluctant or forbidden by their trusts to do so. Funding decisions from NHS England currently cover only a small subset of patients under exceptional circumstances (often under Individual Funding Requests). So even with specialist approval, routinely funded NHS cannabis prescriptions remain rare.

What Does This Mean For Patients? The Current Landscape of UK Medical Cannabis Access

For UK patients hoping to get medical cannabis on the NHS, here's the straightforward summary:

- **It is legal for certain specialists to prescribe medical cannabis.**
- **Most NHS trusts and clinicians do not routinely fund or prescribe these products.**
- **Obtaining an NHS cannabis prescription is difficult and highly selective.**
- **Many patients turn to private clinics for access, which can be costly.**
- **Resources like medicalcannabis.co.uk help find private providers; releaf.co.uk offers clear explainers of the current laws and options.**

Note on pricing: At the time of writing, no specific NHS prices for medical cannabis were publicly detailed due to limited NHS prescribing and the variable nature of private consultation costs. If future sources specify exact NHS prices, these will be quoted and attributed accurately.

Things Marketing Says but NHS Guidelines Do Not

Marketing Claim What NHS Guidance Actually Says "Medical cannabis is now widely available on the NHS." NHS cannabis prescriptions are extremely rare and highly restricted to specialist-approved cases. "GPs can prescribe medical cannabis anytime." Only specialists can prescribe; GPs do not currently have prescribing rights for cannabis-based medicines. "You will never have to pay for medical cannabis if prescribed." Most cannabis-based medicines are not routinely funded by the NHS, so patients often pay privately. "All cannabis products are licensed and approved by NICE." Most products are unlicensed and lack large-scale NICE approval; clinical evidence is limited.

Final Takeaway: It's Legal, But Getting NHS Medical Cannabis Access Is Not Simple

The 2018 rescheduling paved the way for legal medical cannabis prescribing in the UK under specialist care but did not make it an open or routinely funded NHS option. The combination of specialist-only prescribing rules, cautious

NHS funding policies, and the prevalence of unlicensed cannabis-based products means NHS access remains limited and challenging.

If you believe medical cannabis could help your condition, start by discussing this with your specialist team to understand your options. For many, private clinics accessible via directories like [medicalcannabis.co.uk](https://www.medicalcannabis.co.uk) are the practical route to obtain prescriptions, albeit with significant cost implications.

For clear, patient-friendly guides on UK medical cannabis access, [releaf.co.uk](https://www.releaf.co.uk) remains an excellent resource.

Remember: **Legal does not always mean easy or free on the NHS.** The journey to medical cannabis treatment in the UK is a cautious, specialist-led process that still has a long way to go before becoming mainstream in the NHS.