

Since the 2018 reclassification of cannabis-based products for medicinal use in the UK, patients and healthcare professionals alike have navigated a complex landscape around **unlicensed cannabis medicine** prescription on the NHS. Despite growing public interest and widespread media attention, it's crucial to understand what "unlicensed" really means, how it affects NHS funding, and why the UK's *medicines regulator UK* and health system remain cautious about prescribing these therapies.

The 2018 Rescheduling of Cannabis-Based Products for Medicinal Use

In November 2018, the UK government's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) rescheduled cannabis-based products from Schedule 1 — where they were previously treated as illegal substances with "no medicinal value" — to Schedule 2 on the Misuse of Drugs Regulations. This legal change meant that:

- Specialist doctors in the UK could legally prescribe cannabis-derived medicinal products.
- Patients with certain conditions could, at last, access cannabis medicines prescribed on the NHS or privately.
- This reform did *not* guarantee NHS funding or widespread availability but opened the door to legal prescribing under strict conditions.

To put this simply: before 2018, no NHS doctor could legally prescribe medical cannabis; since then, some doctors can prescribe, but the rules are still tight.

What Does 'Unlicensed' Mean for Medical Cannabis?

Unlike many licensed medicines widely prescribed on the NHS, the majority of cannabis-based products are **unlicensed medicines**. This does not mean they are illegal — quite the opposite. An unlicensed medicine is a product authorised by a specialist prescriber when no licensed alternative is suitable for the patient's needs.

Here's the key difference:

- **Licensed medicines** have undergone rigorous clinical trials and regulatory review through the UK's medicines regulator UK — the MHRA — to ensure quality, safety, and efficacy.
- **Unlicensed cannabis medicines** lack this comprehensive MHRA licensing status largely because cannabis-based products are complex, plant-derived formulations with variable components, posing challenges for standardised trials.

As a result, many commonly prescribed cannabis-based medicines—particularly oils and flower formulations—are technically unlicensed, often imported with quality controls but not yet licensed by MHRA.

What This Means for Patients

Simply put, an unlicensed cannabis medicine is one your specialist doctor prescribes because no other licensed medicine fit your condition exactly, but it doesn't have the same full regulatory approval as other UK-licensed drugs.

For detailed patient-friendly explanations, turn to resources like [releaf.co.uk](https://www.releaf.co.uk), which breaks down what licensed and unlicensed medicines mean and what to expect from treatment.

NHS Funding vs Legal Prescribing: What's Allowed and What's Paid For?

A critical distinction is between **legal prescribing** and **NHS funding**. While medical cannabis can now be prescribed legally, *the NHS does not routinely fund unlicensed cannabis-based products except in certain very rare cases*. This is due to concerns over:

- Limited robust clinical trial evidence meeting NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) standards
- Variable product quality and consistency across suppliers
- Concerns about cost-effectiveness and long-term safety

This means most cannabis prescriptions remain private, with patients expected to pay substantial amounts themselves. To find clinics offering both private and NHS pathways, sites like [medicalcannabis.co.uk](https://www.medicalcannabis.co.uk) provide directory and comparison tools, though prices can vary widely. *No specific prices were stated in the sources I reviewed—if price details appear in credible future updates, they will be quoted and attributed precisely.*



Specialist-Only Prescribing Rules

One crucial NHS rule is that **only specialist consultants can prescribe cannabis-based medicines on the NHS**. General practitioners (GPs) are currently not authorised to initiate prescriptions for unlicensed cannabis products. Instead, patients usually must be referred to specialists in neurology, pain management, or palliative care who have the necessary expertise and who understand the complexities of these products.

This ensures that:



1. Treatment decisions are made by doctors fully trained and familiar with the nuances of medical cannabis.
2. Risks of inappropriate prescribing or misunderstanding do not harm patient safety.
3. Prescribing aligns with the very cautious approach NHS bodies expect for novel or unlicensed medicines.

Why Is the NHS Cautious About Prescribing Unlicensed Cannabis-Based Medicines?

The NHS's cautious approach does not mean medical cannabis has [vergemagazine.co.uk](https://www.vergemagazine.co.uk) no role but reflects a desire to balance access with patient safety and responsible stewardship of NHS resources. Key concerns include:

- **Limited clinical evidence:** Few large-scale, randomised controlled trials confirm clear benefit for many indications, although some conditions (like rare childhood epilepsy syndromes) have strong supportive evidence.
- **Product variability:** Different products can vary significantly in cannabinoid content (like THC and CBD ratios), affecting efficacy and side-effect profiles.
- **Uncertainty about long-term effects:** More research is needed on the safety of prolonged use, especially given cannabis's psychoactive components.
- **Regulatory challenges:** Standardising these botanically derived medicines is complex, delaying MHRA licensing for many formulations.

This means NHS guidance focuses on carefully selected patients, specialist prescribing, and continuous review — a very different picture than how some private clinics market easy or rapid access to medical cannabis.

In Summary: What Patients Should Take Away

- **Unlicensed cannabis medicine** means the product is not authorised by the UK medicines regulator but may still be legally prescribed by specialists on a case-by-case basis.
- The 2018 reclassification allowed legal prescribing but did *not* guarantee NHS funding or widespread use.
- Most NHS prescriptions for cannabis-based products happen only under strict specialist-only prescribing rules.

- The NHS remains cautious, requiring strong evidence and careful consideration before funding or recommending unlicensed cannabis products.
- Patients seeking access often turn to private clinics listed on directories like [medicalcannabis.co.uk](https://www.medicalcannabis.co.uk), while keeping in mind the differences between legal prescribing, NHS funding, and private treatment.
- For accessible explanations of what unlicensed medicines mean and patient experiences, [releaf.co.uk](https://www.releaf.co.uk) remains a valuable resource.

Final Thoughts

Understanding the term '*unlicensed*' *medical cannabis* demystifies much of the confusion surrounding NHS prescribing. It's not about "illegal" or "black market" medicines but about a cautious, evidence-led healthcare system ensuring safety and best outcomes. Patients interested in exploring cannabis-based treatments should always consult specialist prescribers and use reputable resources to make informed decisions.

If new evidence or pricing information emerges, I will update this article accordingly to reflect the most accurate and transparent information.