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Since the pivotal changes in November 2018, medical cannabis has gained significant attention in the UK. However, despite media hype and public curiosity, cannabis remains a tightly regulated medicine—and it's vital for patients considering private routes to understand the nuances before committing to any treatment.

This guide unpacks the essential information on private prescribing in the UK, clarifies common legal confusions, and explains why most prescriptions are issued through specialist consultations. We'll naturally mention companies like Nationwide Pharmacies, a key player in supplying medical cannabis products, to provide practical context.

## Understanding the Legal Framework: Class vs Schedule Confusion

When discussing medical cannabis, many people conflate two distinct legal classifications: **Class** and **Schedule**. These terms, while related to drug law, serve different purposes and affect how cannabis is regulated and prescribed.

### What is a Class Drug?

Under the *Misuse of Drugs Act 1971*, drugs are classified into three classes—Class A, B, and C—based primarily on their perceived harm. Cannabis is a **Class B** drug. This classification means <https://www.tntmagazine.com/leisure-entertainment/leisure/why-is-cannabis-still-illegal-in-the-uk-the-history-behind-medical-cannabis-law/> recreational use, possession, or supply remain illegal without authorisation.

*Takeaway:* Being a Class B drug means cannabis is prohibited for recreational use and regulated strictly under criminal law.

### What is a Schedule Drug?

Schedule classification comes under the *Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001*. This schedule system governs how controlled drugs are prescribed, stored, and dispensed within medical and scientific contexts.

Schedule Definition Relevance to Medical Cannabis  
Schedule 1 Drugs not available for medicinal use (e.g., LSD)  
Cannabis flowers remain here, so cannot be prescribed.  
Schedule 2 Drugs with medical uses but potential for abuse (e.g., morphine)  
Cannabis-based products may fall under this for extracts.  
Schedule 3 Medicines with lower abuse potential (e.g., certain barbiturates)  
Some cannabis medicines may be regulated here.

Unlike Class status, Schedule affects how medicines are supplied, stored, and who can prescribe them. For example, **cannabis flowers remain Schedule 1** (no medical use recognised), meaning that only specialist-approved non-flower products are currently prescribable.

*Takeaway:* Cannabis remains Class B but certain cannabis-based products now appear in Schedules 2 or 3 for medicinal use, heavily restricting how and what can be prescribed.

## What Changed in November 2018?

The major turning point came with new regulations in November 2018, when *medical cannabis was rescheduled* to allow specialist doctors to legally prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use. This was a significant shift but also a limited one:



- Only **specialist consultants** registered with the General Medical Council (GMC) can prescribe medical cannabis privately or on the NHS.
- Prescriptions are limited to **certain cannabis-based products**, such as Sativex (for multiple sclerosis) and Epidyolex (for rare epilepsy), plus some unlicensed cannabis oils.
- The use of cannabis flowers (the plant material commonly smoked) remains prohibited under Schedule 1 and thus cannot be prescribed.

This change followed extensive public and political debate, partly spurred by high-profile cases involving children with severe epilepsy. It granted patients with certain conditions hope—but, crucially, not blanket access.

*Takeaway:* November 2018 eased the way for specialist prescribing but within tight boundaries—licensed products only, specialist-only prescribers, and no cannabis flower prescriptions.

## Why Does Cannabis Remain Illegal Under the 1971 Act?

Despite the 2018 update, cannabis is still illegal for recreational use because the *Misuse of Drugs Act 1971* classifies it as a Class B drug. This law has not been repealed or amended to decriminalise cannabis for non-medical use.

Key reasons:

1. **Public health concerns:** Ongoing debates about potential harms like dependency and mental health effects.
2. **International law obligations:** The UK is a signatory to international drug control treaties, which influence domestic legislation.
3. **Focus on medical regulation:** The government chose to create a controlled medical pathway rather than broadly legalise cannabis.

In practice, this means recreational cannabis remains unlawful, and possession or supply can result in criminal prosecutions—irrespective of the medical cannabis system's existence.

*Takeaway:* Medical cannabis availability doesn't equate to full legalisation—recreational cannabis is still a criminal offence.

## Specialist-Only Prescribing: Why is NHS Access So Limited?

One of the most frequent questions we hear is: "Why can't my GP prescribe medical cannabis?" The short answer: **only specialist consultants can prescribe it under current regulations.** Here's why.

- **Limited clinical evidence:** NHS England and NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) state that there is insufficient evidence for the routine use of medical cannabis for most conditions.
- **Complex product range:** The diversity and complexity of cannabis-based medicines require specialist knowledge to tailor treatment plans safely.
- **Concern over unlicensed products:** Many cannabis products are unlicensed medicines, meaning they have not undergone full regulatory approval by the MHRA (Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency). Specialists are best placed to assess risks and benefits.

As a result, NHS prescriptions are rare and mostly limited to a few conditions like severe epilepsy or multiple sclerosis spasticity. Most patients seeking cannabis treatment privately must consult specialised private clinics.

*Takeaway:* GPs cannot initiate cannabis prescriptions; access is controlled to ensure specialist oversight and patient safety.

## What Patients Should Know About Private Prescribing in the UK

Patients turning to private prescribing should understand it's a distinct pathway from NHS treatment, often involving:

1. **Specialist Consultation:** To comply with legal and clinical standards, patients must typically undergo a consultation with a qualified specialist, either face-to-face or virtually.
2. **Unlicensed Products Are Common:** Unlike licensed medicines, many cannabis-based products prescribed privately are unlicensed. This means they lack comprehensive clinical trial data, and quality or effects may vary between products or batches.
3. **Costs Can Be Significant:** Private consultations and prescriptions can cost several hundred to thousands of pounds. Clinics often work alongside pharmacies like Nationwide Pharmacies, which specialise in sourcing and dispensing medical cannabis products.

4. **Ongoing Monitoring:** Specialist prescribers usually monitor patients regularly to assess effectiveness and side effects. This ongoing relationship is crucial for safe use.

Choosing a reputable clinic and pharmacy is essential. Nationwide Pharmacies, for example, is a well-established UK-based pharmacy experienced in handling NHS and private medical cannabis prescriptions, offering a robust supply chain and compliance with UK standards.

*Takeaway:* Private prescribing involves specialist consultation, often unlicensed products, and potentially high costs—patients must do thorough research before proceeding.

## Common Misunderstandings to Avoid

- **"Weed is legal now":** Incorrect. Only certain medicinal cannabis products are legal when prescribed by specialists; recreational cannabis remains illegal.
- **Class vs Schedule mixing:** The Class B status governs criminal law; Schedule governs prescription controls—both must be understood.
- **NHS access equals private access:** NHS prescriptions are limited and free at point of delivery; private prescriptions incur costs and require paying for both consultation and medication.
- **All products are licensed:** Many private prescriptions are for unlicensed cannabis oils, meaning no guaranteed standard efficacy or safety data.

*Takeaway:* Understanding the precise legal and medical distinctions helps avoid confusion and false expectations.

## Summary Table: Key Facts for Patients Considering Private Medical Cannabis

**Key Topic** What Patients Should Know  
**Legal Status** Cannabis is Class B (illegal recreational use) but some medicines are legally prescribable under Schedule 2 or 3.  
**2018 Rules** Only specialists can prescribe; cannabis flowers remain illegal; NHS access is very limited.  
**Prescribers** Specialist consultants only—GPs cannot prescribe medical cannabis.  
**Private Prescribing** Requires specialist consultation; often unlicensed products; can be expensive.  
**Companies Involved** Pharmacies like Nationwide Pharmacies supply private prescriptions following legal protocols.

## Final Thoughts

Medical cannabis in the UK sits at a complex crossroads of law, medicine, and patient need. Before paying privately, patients must grasp the specialist-only prescribing model, the status of cannabis under both Class and Schedule laws, and the prevalence of unlicensed products. Partnering with recognised clinics and pharmacies, such as those that liaise with Nationwide Pharmacies, ensures safer access and adherence to legal requirements.

Remember, medical cannabis is not a cure-all, nor is it a legal recreational alternative—it's a carefully regulated medicine with specific indications and controls. Patients equipped with reliable information are far better positioned to make safe, informed decisions.

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