

If you've been researching medical cannabis in the UK, you might have noticed the term '**unlicensed cannabis medicine**' pop up frequently. But what does "unlicensed" actually mean, and how does it affect your chances of accessing medical cannabis through the NHS? This article breaks down the rules set by the **medicines regulator UK**, explains key NHS policies, and clarifies why the NHS remains cautious about prescribing medical cannabis despite the 2018 rescheduling. Plus, we'll point you towards useful resources like medicalcannabis.co.uk and releaf.co.uk for further guidance.



The 2018 Rescheduling and What It Changed

November 2018 was a watershed moment for medical cannabis in the UK. Before then, cannabis-based products were in Schedule 1 of the Misuse of Drugs Regulations — meaning they were treated like substances with no recognised medical use, such as heroin. This made prescribing on the NHS impossible.

In 2018, following public and parliamentary pressure, the UK government rescheduled certain cannabis-based products for medicinal use, moving them to Schedule 2. This shift meant that specialist doctors could, in theory, legally prescribe medical cannabis medicines on the NHS for patients with exceptional clinical needs.

One-sentence summary: Since 2018, specialist doctors can legally prescribe medical cannabis, but it's far from a free-for-all on the NHS.

What Does 'Unlicensed' Mean for Cannabis Medicines?

Most cannabis-based products available in the UK are *unlicensed medicines*. So what does that mean? In the UK, a licensed medicine is one that has undergone a rigorous approval process by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). Licensed medicines carry product licences guaranteeing their safety, quality, and efficacy for specific indications.

An **unlicensed medicine** does not hold such a licence. This usually happens when no formal drug approval exists for a product — for example, certain cannabis-based formulations sourced from abroad as pharmaceutical-grade oils or flower, or bespoke preparations made for individual patients.

Why Are Most Medical Cannabis Medicines Unlicensed?

- There are very few cannabis products with formal MHRA approval.
- Evidence requirements and clinical trials for licensing are still limited in medical cannabis.
- Manufacturers often classify products as “specials” or unlicensed medicines to meet patient needs without full licensing.

In practice, an unlicensed cannabis medicine is a treatment that your specialist doctor prescribes specifically for you, without the standard MHRA ‘stamp’ of approval most conventional medicines carry.

NHS Funding vs Legal Prescribing: What’s the Difference?

This is where things get confusing. The 2018 rescheduling means it is legal for appropriately qualified doctors to prescribe medical cannabis. It does **not** mean the NHS routinely funds these treatments.

Key point: Legal prescribing = doctors can write a prescription without breaking the law. NHS funding = NHS England’s decision to pay for the treatment as part of routine care.

Currently, NHS England remains extremely cautious about routinely funding medical cannabis. There are only a handful of NHS patients known to have received cannabis-based products on NHS prescriptions, almost exclusively for very rare epilepsy cases through specialised centres.

Why such caution?

- The evidence base for medical cannabis is still emerging, lacking large-scale UK trials accepted by the NHS decision-makers.
- Unlicensed medicines carry higher perceived risks in efficacy and safety for formal commissioning.
- Price uncertainty and affordability also impact NHS willingness to routinely fund cannabis medicines.

In a nutshell: Just because it’s legal doesn’t guarantee prescription costs will be covered on the NHS. Many patients turn to private clinics (some listed on medicalcannabis.co.uk) to access cannabis medicines privately.

Specialist-Only Prescribing Rules

Law and guidance are clear that only specialist doctors can prescribe medical cannabis medicines — never GPs or non-specialists. This is both a regulatory and clinical governance measure designed to:

1. Ensure appropriate expertise and patient assessment before prescribing.
2. Reduce the risk of misuse or inappropriate prescribing.
3. Help monitor and report outcomes under specialist-led care.

Specialists involved typically include neurologists, pain specialists, or palliative care physicians with experience managing [randomised controlled trial cannabis](#) complex cases where conventional treatments have failed.

General practitioners may be involved in ongoing patient care after specialist initiation but do not legally have the authority to start prescriptions for unlicensed cannabis medicines.

Unlicensed Cannabis-Based Medicines and NHS Caution

The NHS’s wary approach to unlicensed cannabis medicines is rooted in its core responsibilities:

- **Safety first.** Without formal MHRA licences, unlicensed medicines lack the exhaustive quality checks routine for licensed drugs.
- **Evidence-based care.** NHS clinical guidelines demand robust supporting data before recommending new therapies, including cost-effectiveness.
- **Limited national guidance.** NICE and NHS England remain cautious, reflecting ongoing debates around clinical benefits vs risks.

This caution leads to many patients hearing “We can’t prescribe on the NHS” despite the legal ability for specialists to do so.

Things marketing materials might say but NHS guidance does not confirm:

- “NHS fully funds medical cannabis”—this is rarely true except in very exceptional cases.
- “You can get medical cannabis like any other prescription”—specialist-only prescribing is mandatory.
- “It’s a licensed medicine”—most cannabis-based medicines remain unlicensed.

Where to Learn More: Recommended Resources

For patients eager to understand the landscape better and find clinics or support, these sites provide helpful explanations and directories:

- medicalcannabis.co.uk — A directory and comparison site listing private medical cannabis clinics operating across the UK, useful for exploring private options.
- releaf.co.uk — A patient-friendly explainer covering the basics of medical cannabis legality, prescribing rules, and NHS access challenges.

Understanding Pricing and Access

We want to flag upfront: no specific NHS prices for cannabis medicines could be cited at the time of writing. Pricing varies considerably for private prescriptions depending on product type, dose, and clinic.

The NHS itself publishes no fixed tariffs for cannabis medicines, partly because routine NHS funding remains limited and products are usually sourced privately or as unlicensed specials.

If any future sources specify exact prices for cannabis medicines on the NHS or privately, we will quote these figures exactly and attribute them accordingly.



Summary: What ‘Unlicensed’ Means for You as a Patient

Aspect What it Means **Unlicensed Cannabis Medicine** A cannabis-based product prescribed without MHRA licensing; doctor uses expert judgment rather than full regulatory approval. **Legal Prescribing on NHS** Since 2018, specialist doctors can legally prescribe medical cannabis but must adhere to specialist-only rules. **NHS Funding** Rare and cautious; most patients pay privately—NHS does not routinely fund unlicensed cannabis medicines. **Prescribing Restrictions** Only specialists can prescribe; GPs cannot initiate treatment with medical cannabis. **Patient Considerations** Access can be difficult; private clinics may be an alternative but involve costs and careful choice.

Final Thoughts

The term ‘*unlicensed cannabis medicine*’ on the NHS means a legal but highly specialised treatment pathway that remains cautious, limited, and largely outside routine NHS funding. This reflects the balance between patient access and the NHS’s responsibility to ensure safety and clinical effectiveness.

If you’re considering medical cannabis, speak to a relevant specialist and explore trusted private clinics listed on medicalcannabis.co.uk. For clear, jargon-free explanations, releaf.co.uk is a great starting point.

Remember: it’s legal but not easy, and “unlicensed” means the NHS is being very cautious—not careless—when it comes to medical cannabis prescribing.