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The debate around medical cannabis in the UK is frequently riddled with confusion—much of it stemming from misunderstandings about what makes a medicine *licensed* versus *lawful to prescribe*, alongside complexity around unlicensed medicines and marketing authorisation. Even among healthcare professionals and patients, the nuances can be difficult to grasp, often leading to misinformation and frustration.

This article will unpack the core themes behind the confusion, including the difference between Class and Schedule in drug legislation, what exactly changed in November 2018, and why cannabis remains illegal under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 despite the NHS permitting specialist prescribing. We'll also explain the limited NHS access and the role of companies like Nationwide Pharmacies in the supply landscape.

## Class vs Schedule: Clearing Up the Legal Categories

To understand why medical cannabis is so misunderstood, it's crucial to first clarify the difference between the terms **Class** and **Schedule** under UK drug law—they are often mistakenly used interchangeably, but have distinct meanings:

- **Class** Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MDA 1971), which determines the legal status and penalties for possession, supply or production. The classes are A (highest risk), B, and C.
- **Schedule** Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001, which regulate the medical use, manufacture, and supply of controlled substances, including cannabis-based products for medicinal use. Schedules 1 to 5 determine licensing and prescribing restrictions.

Important to note is that cannabis remains a **Class B** drug under the MDA 1971, which means possession or supply without appropriate licences is illegal and attracts criminal penalties.

Under the **Misuse of Drugs Regulations (MDR) 2001**, cannabis-based products for medicinal use are usually placed in Schedule 2 or Schedule 4, but this categorisation regulates their clinical use, not their legal status as 'legal' or 'illegal' drugs. This distinction is often overlooked, leading to misconceptions that medical cannabis is "legalised" in the same way as a household medicine.

*Takeaway:* Class B means illegal for non-licensed possession; Schedule determines allowable medical use and prescribing controls.

## What Changed in November 2018?

November 2018 marked a pivotal moment when the UK government rescheduled cannabis-derived medicinal products, officially permitting specialist doctors to prescribe them legally through the NHS or privately. This was intended to improve access for patients with certain conditions such as epilepsy, chemotherapy side effects, and multiple sclerosis symptoms.

Specifically, the changes allowed cannabis-based products for medicinal use to be accessed under **Schedule 2 or 4 of the MDR 2001**, meaning they could be prescribed as controlled medicines with appropriate regulation.

However, this did **not** legalise cannabis outright. It remained a Class B controlled drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act, with possession without prescription still illegal. The amendment was instead a measured regulatory step acknowledging the therapeutic potential of cannabis products under tightly controlled medical supervision.

Despite the policy change, patient access on the NHS remains extremely limited for several reasons that we explore below.



*Takeaway:* November 2018 allowed *specialist-only prescribing* of cannabis medicines but did not legalise recreational or unsupervised use.

## Why Cannabis Remains Illegal Under the 1971 Act

The fact that cannabis is still a Class B substance under the *Misuse of Drugs Act 1971* is a central cause of ongoing misunderstanding. Most people equate "illegal" with "not allowed in any circumstances," but UK drug law creates a nuanced framework:

1. Class B classification means unauthorized possession, supply, or cultivation is a criminal offence.
2. However, medicines derived from cannabis can be licensed for medical use with a **marketing authorisation** (licence to sell as a medicine) or prescribed as **unlicensed medicines** under specific guidelines.
3. The medicine's controlled status means it requires special storage, record-keeping, prescription forms, and pharmacist dispensing protocols.
4. The law permits the government to modify scheduling to support medical availability without removing general prohibitions.

Due to this framework, the term "legal cannabis" is misleading without context on the specific legal and medical restrictions in place. Unlike fully licensed drugs such as paracetamol, many cannabis products are still unlicensed medicines under UK law.

*Takeaway:* Cannabis is still illegal except when prescribed legally under strict controls—it has not been fully legalised despite medical access.

## Licensed vs Lawful to Prescribe: Marketing Authorisation Confusion

One of the most persistent sources of confusion is the difference between **licensed medicines** (those with a marketing authorisation) and medicines which are **lawful to prescribe** despite lacking a licence.

A **licensed medicine** has been extensively tested, approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), and given a marketing authorisation. This is a legal permission to market the treatment in the UK. Licensed medicines have predictable dosages and documented efficacy and safety.

Conversely, many medical cannabis products used in the UK are **unlicensed medicines**. These do not have marketing authorisation but can still be prescribed when standard licensed options do not meet a patient's needs. Specialist doctors can prescribe unlicensed medicines under their clinical responsibility ('off-label' prescribing rules).

This situation leads to misunderstanding because patients often assume "licensed" means "legal" or "NHS available," whereas " **lawful to prescribe**" simply means clinicians can use their judgement to prescribe unlicensed products legally.

Companies such as **Nationwide Pharmacies** operate in this niche, supplying unlicensed cannabis-based products to private prescribers. They navigate the complex regulations, ensuring products meet quality standards despite lacking full marketing authorisation. Nationwide Pharmacies is renowned for supporting private patient access to medicinal cannabis while adhering to regulatory frameworks.



*Takeaway:* Licensed  $\neq$  only lawful option; unlicensed cannabis medicines can be legally prescribed by specialists with care.

## Specialist-Only Prescribing and Why NHS Access Is Limited

Under current regulations, only **specialist consultants** with expertise in relevant conditions can prescribe cannabis medicines on the NHS. General Practitioners (GPs) cannot initiate treatment but may continue prescriptions started by specialists.

The rationale includes:

- The need for specialist skills to evaluate suitability due to variable efficacy and dosing complexities.
- The limited robust clinical trial data and lack of large-scale NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) guidance to support widespread prescribing.
- Concerns about safety, dependency, and monitoring requirements.
- Budgetary constraints: cost-effectiveness remains under review.

Consequently, NHS access is tightly controlled and limited to a small group of patients with conditions deemed eligible. Many patients turn to the private sector for cannabis prescriptions, often sourcing products through suppliers like Nationwide Pharmacies, which provides service tailored to those unable to access medicines via the NHS.

*Takeaway:* NHS cannabis prescribing is specialist-only and rare; private suppliers fill the access gap for patients seeking treatment.

## Summary Table: Key Distinctions in UK Medical Cannabis Terminology

| Term                            | Definition                                               | Relevance to Medical Cannabis                          | Class (A, B, C)                                                     | Drug risk and penalty classification under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971         |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cannabis                        | is Class B, illegal to possess or supply without licence | Schedule (1-5)                                         | Drug                                                                | classification for medical prescribing under Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001   |
| Licensed Medicine Product       | with MHRA marketing authorisation for sale and safe use  | Few cannabis products currently have this status in UK | Unlicensed Medicine Product                                         | without marketing authorisation but legally prescribable by specialists         |
| Most medical cannabis in the UK | is prescribed this way                                   | Lawful to Prescribe                                    | Permissible for clinicians to prescribe under regulatory guidelines | Includes licensed and certain unlicensed medicines under specialist supervision |

## Final Thoughts

Understanding the licensed versus unlicensed issue with UK medical cannabis is all about appreciating subtle legal and regulatory distinctions often glossed over in media or popular discussion. Cannabis remains a controlled Class B substance under the 1971 Act, despite specialist prescribing changes in [tntmagazine.com](https://www.tntmagazine.com) 2018 that enabled lawful prescribing under strict controls.

Patients seeking medical cannabis must navigate a complicated landscape where most available products are unlicensed medicines prescribed by specialists, often accessed via private pharmacies like Nationwide Pharmacies. NHS access remains limited due to clinical, legal, and budgetary constraints.

Clearing up confusion on Class vs Schedule, licensing vs lawful prescribing, and marketing authorisation distinctions is vital to realistic expectations and informed decision-making for patients, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

**Remember:** Medical cannabis use in the UK is lawful but tightly controlled—it is not "legalised" in a broad sense, and licensed medicines are not the only lawful option prescribers have.

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