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The medical cannabis landscape in the UK remains a complex and oft-misunderstood topic. Since November 2018, when significant regulatory changes took place, the prescribing of cannabis-based products for medicinal use has been technically possible. However, many patients and even some healthcare professionals remain uncertain about who can prescribe medical cannabis, the legal status of cannabis, and why access through the NHS remains limited.

If you're wondering whether you need to see a specialist doctor, what the difference is between Class and Schedule drugs, or how companies like Nationwide Pharmacies fit into the picture, this explainer addresses those questions clearly and carefully.

## Understanding Class vs Schedule Confusion

One of the common sources of misunderstanding is the difference between the terms **Class** and **Schedule** when referring to controlled substances under UK law.

- **Class**
- **Schedule**

*Why does this distinction matter?* Because even though medicinal cannabis was rescheduled in November 2018, it remains a **Class B drug** under the MDA 1971, which means cannabis is still illegal to possess without a prescription, and strict rules apply.

Furthermore, before November 2018, cannabis-based products for medicinal use were effectively **Schedule 1 drugs**, meaning doctors legally could not prescribe them on the NHS or privately without special Home Office licensing. Now, certain cannabis-based products are moved to **Schedule 2 or Schedule 3 depending on formulation**, enabling prescription by doctors—but only under strict conditions.

**Takeaway:** Class relates to criminal penalty categories; Schedule affects medicinal prescribing permissions. Confusing the two leads to misconceptions regarding legality and access.

## What Changed in November 2018?

Prior to 1 November 2018, the UK effectively prohibited the prescribing of cannabis-based products for medicinal use (CBPMs). The government's rescheduling of certain cannabis products from Schedule 1 to Schedule 2 or 3 under the MDR 2001 enabled, for the first time, doctors legally to prescribe them.

This historic change followed pressure from patient groups, high-profile cases such as that of Billy Caldwell, and changing global attitudes toward medical cannabis.

Key points about the November 2018 change:

1. **Prescribing became legal—but not easy:** Doctors could now prescribe cannabis-based medicines but only with appropriate clinical justification, specialist knowledge, and usually after other treatment options had been exhausted.
2. **Still tightly controlled:** Only cannabis medicines with a UK Marketing Authorisation (licence) or certain unlicensed medicinal cannabis products could be prescribed. Many still qualify as unlicensed 'specials' needing special handling.

3. **Limited NHS funding:** NHS England has not generally approved routine funding for cannabis prescriptions, so most patients access CBPMs privately.

To reiterate, *medicinal cannabis was not fully legalised in November 2018*. It simply became possible to prescribe in defined circumstances.

**Takeaway:** November 2018 legally enabled medical cannabis prescribing under strict regulation but did not legalise recreational or over-the-counter use.

## Why Cannabis Remains Illegal Under the 1971 Act

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 remains the principal legislation governing cannabis use, possession, and supply in the UK.

Despite the nuanced changes to the Misuse of Drugs Regulations allowing medical prescribing, cannabis remains a

**Class B drug** under the 1971 Act, meaning:

- Possession or supply of cannabis without prescription is a criminal offence.
- Growing or trafficking cannabis is illegal and subject to serious penalties.
- Doctors must follow strict regulations when prescribing cannabis products; illegal supply or possession cannot be condoned.

This dual regime means that while medical cannabis prescribing is allowed under the MDR 2001, recreational cannabis remains illegal. Patients should avoid confusing the two—possession of cannabis without a specialist authorised prescription can lead to police action.

**Takeaway:** Medicinal prescribing exceptions exist, but cannabis remains a controlled Class B drug under the 1971 Act, meaning recreational or unauthorised possession and supply are illegal.

## Specialist-Only Prescribing: What Does It Mean?

One of the most frequent questions from patients is: *Can any doctor prescribe medical cannabis?* The short answer: **usually not**.

Because of the strict clinical framework, the General Medical Council (GMC) specialist register role is central:

- Only doctors on the GMC specialist register for relevant fields—like neurology, pain management, or paediatrics—are typically authorised to initiate cannabis-based product prescriptions.
- These specialists evaluate if the patient meets strict clinical criteria after conventional treatments have failed or been ruled out.
- Once a specialist prescribes medical cannabis, ongoing management may sometimes be handed back to the general practitioner (GP), but initiating the prescription remains specialist-led.

This approach stems from the government's position that medical cannabis is a "treatment of last resort," given uncertainties around efficacy, side effects, and cost-effectiveness.

**Why NHS access remains limited** also ties into this: NHS England has issued only provisional paving for prescribing cannabis in exceptional cases (e.g., certain epilepsy syndromes), and has not broadly funded cannabis prescriptions. Therefore, many patients seek private specialist referrals to get prescriptions.

Specialist referral pathways often involve seeing doctors with specific expertise in cannabis prescribing—a process supported by private healthcare providers and licensed pharmacies offering medical cannabis services.

**Takeaway:** Accessing medical cannabis prescriptions commonly requires referral to a GMC-registered specialist doctor experienced in cannabis therapeutics, especially for initial prescribing.

## How Nationwide Pharmacies Supports Medical Cannabis Access

Companies like **Nationwide Pharmacies** have become important players in the medical cannabis ecosystem in the UK. They operate as licensed Specials Manufacturers and Dispensers, providing patients with access to bespoke or imported cannabis-based products following specialist prescriptions.

Key aspects of their role include:

- Dispensing cannabis medicines prescribed by GMC specialist-registered doctors.
- Providing patient support and education to help navigate the private prescribing process.
- Managing regulatory compliance to ensure cannabis-based products reach patients safely and legally.
- Often collaborating with private clinics offering specialist cannabis assessments and prescriptions.

For many patients privately pursuing a medical cannabis referral, Nationwide Pharmacies acts as a trusted provider ensuring the prescribed medicine is legitimate and meets strict UK pharmaceutical standards.

**Takeaway:** Nationwide [tntmagazine](#) Pharmacies facilitates lawful medical cannabis access by dispensing specialist prescriptions and supporting patients within the regulatory framework.

## Summing Up: Do You Have to See a Specialist Doctor?

To answer the focal question:

- **Yes, in almost all cases**, you need to see a GMC-registered specialist doctor to obtain a medical cannabis prescription in the UK.
- Your GP cannot generally initiate cannabis prescriptions but may continue prescribing after specialist initiation.
- This specialist-only prescribing approach is due to legal, clinical, and policy reasons aiming to keep cannabis use medically justified, safe, and traceable.
- Medical cannabis remains a Class B drug under the 1971 Act but certain products are reclassified under the MDR 2001 to allow controlled medical prescribing.
- Despite the 2018 reclassification, NHS access is limited and tightly controlled, so many patients seek private specialist referrals and use licensed companies such as Nationwide Pharmacies to access their medication.

If you're considering medical cannabis, start by consulting your GP to discuss symptoms and treatment history. Your GP can then advise if specialist referral for a cannabis assessment is appropriate. Be cautious of misleading claims implying you can obtain cannabis easily without specialised medical oversight—UK legislation is clear that specialist doctor prescription is the gateway to lawful access.

### Final Takeaway

Access to medical cannabis in the UK requires a specialist doctor prescription due to strict legal and clinical controls. Understanding the distinction between Class and Schedule drugs, the 2018 prescribing reform, and the role of specialist-only prescribing helps clarify the path to safe, legal medicinal cannabis treatment.

