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The question of whether you can legally possess cannabis in the UK if you have a prescription is one that generates lots of confusion, especially because of the complex legal framework around medical cannabis. Since November 2018, some significant changes have taken place that impact medical cannabis legality in the UK, but there are still many myths and misunderstandings — particularly around the often-misused terms like Class vs Schedule drugs.



In this detailed explainer, we'll cover what changed in 2018, why cannabis remains illegal under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the restrictions on NHS prescribing, and what "possession with prescription UK" actually means in practice. We also highlight some key providers such as Nationwide Pharmacies, who help patients access medical cannabis lawfully.

## Class vs Schedule: Clearing Up a Common Confusion

Before we dive into the legality of cannabis possession with a prescription, it's crucial to understand two often mixed-up terms related to controlled substances in the UK: **Class** and **Schedule**.

- **Class** refers to the categorisation of drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MDA). There are three Classes: A, B, and C, with Class A drugs considered the most harmful. Cannabis is currently a Class B drug under this Act, which affects criminal penalties for illegal possession and supply.
- **Schedule** is about the classification under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 (MDR), which regulates prescribing, dispensing, and supply of controlled drugs within healthcare. Cannabis and cannabis-based products for medicinal use are in Schedule 2 or Schedule 1, depending on specific forms.

This distinction is important because even though cannabis is a Class B drug under the MDA — making unprescribed possession illegal — certain cannabis-based medicines can be lawfully prescribed and dispensed under the MDR's Schedule 2 list.

*Takeaway: Class affects criminal penalties; Schedule governs medicinal prescribing.*

# What Changed in November 2018?

November 1st, 2018 marked a pivotal moment in UK cannabis law when the Home Office reclassified cannabis-based products for medicinal use (CBPMs) as Schedule 2 controlled drugs. Prior to this, cannabis was effectively not prescribable on the NHS because cannabis-derived medicines were Schedule 1 (meaning no recognised medicinal use and tightly restricted).



The 2018 changes mean that, technically, specialist doctors are now allowed to prescribe cannabis-based medicines. However, to qualify as a lawful exception to possession offences, such prescriptions must comply with strict criteria.

- Cannabis moved from Schedule 1 (no recognised medical use) to Schedule 2 for specific medicinal products approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).
- This change enabled private prescriptions for CBPMs, and the first NHS prescriptions began shortly after.
- Importantly, possession of cannabis with a valid prescription from a specialist doctor is a lawful exception to criminal prosecution under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

Despite this positive shift, cannabis remains a Class B drug, so possession without prescription is still illegal and subject to penalties.

*Takeaway: Since November 2018, cannabis-based medicines can be prescribed, creating a lawful possession exception.*

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## Why Cannabis Remains Illegal Under the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act

Even though cannabis medicines can be prescribed under strict conditions, the broader legality of cannabis hasn't changed. This is because cannabis plant material and extracts remain listed as a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 — the framework that primarily governs possession, trafficking, and supply offences.

The Act was designed primarily for public safety and criminal justice purposes, not healthcare. It classifies drugs by perceived harm and illegal status, not medical utility. This is why possession of cannabis without a prescription — even a small amount for personal use — remains an offence liable to arrest, caution, or prosecution.

Medical cannabis prescriptions therefore create a narrow lawful exception to this criminal offence. The exceptions depend on the patient having a valid prescription issued by a recognised specialist registered with the General Medical Council (GMC) and dispensed legally by a pharmacy.

*Takeaway: Cannabis remains illegal as a Class B drug; prescriptions are a narrow exception.*

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

Unlike many medicines, cannabis-based products for medicinal use can only be prescribed by specialist doctors, typically consultants with expertise in relevant clinical areas like neurology or pain management. General Practitioners (GPs) currently cannot initiate a prescription but can continue one if a specialist initiates it.

The reasons for this specialist-only prescribing are several:

1. **Lack of robust clinical trial data:** The clinical evidence for many cannabis products, especially for conditions like chronic pain or epilepsy, is still emerging.
2. **Controlled substance regulation:** Cannabis is still tightly regulated, requiring clinical oversight and risk management.
3. **Training and expertise:** Specialists are deemed better equipped to assess patients' needs, benefits, and risks.
4. **NHS prescribing guidelines:** NHS England has set strict commissioning policies, often restricting access to very specific clinical cases, such as treatment-resistant epilepsy in children.

Because of these restrictions, most patients receive medical cannabis prescriptions privately. Companies like Nationwide Pharmacies assist patients by sourcing and dispensing specialist prescriptions lawfully. NHS access remains rare and highly controlled.

*Takeaway: Only specialists can prescribe medical cannabis, limiting NHS availability.*

## Possession With Prescription UK: What Does It Actually Mean?

If you manage to obtain a prescription for cannabis-based medicine from a specialist, possession is lawful, but this is not the same as cannabis being fully legal. It means:

- The medicine must be dispensed by a registered pharmacy (like Nationwide Pharmacies) under the prescription.
- You must possess the cannabis-based product strictly for medical use as prescribed. Possession outside medical use is illegal.
- The product must be a licensed or properly authorised cannabis-based medicine. Possession of raw cannabis flower or unlicensed preparations remains illegal.
- If you travel with the medicine, you should carry prescription documentation and be aware that many countries do not recognise UK prescriptions.

This lawful possession exception means police should not arrest or prosecute patients who possess prescribed cannabis medicines for lawful medical purposes. However, misuse or possession beyond the prescribed quantity can still attract enforcement.

*Takeaway: A prescription creates a narrow legal safe harbour for possession — only for prescribed cannabis medicines.*

## Summary Table: Cannabis Prescribing and Possession in the UK

Aspect Status Notes Cannabis classification Class B drug under Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 Illegal to possess or supply without exemption Medical cannabis scheduling Schedule 2 controlled drug (since Nov 2018) Allows prescribing and dispensing in healthcare Prescribing rights Specialist doctors only GPs cannot initiate prescriptions but may continue them NHS access Very limited and highly controlled Mostly restricted to specific conditions; private prescribing more common Possession with prescription Lawful exception to offence Must be for prescribed medical cannabis medicine only Raw cannabis possession Illegal without prescription Still a criminal offence

## The Role of Companies Like Nationwide Pharmacies

For patients who qualify, accessing medical cannabis in the UK can be complex. This is where specialist pharmacies such as Nationwide Pharmacies come into play. They provide:

- Access to medically approved cannabis-based products via valid prescriptions
- Secure dispensing and delivery of controlled cannabis medicines
- Support navigating regulatory compliance and documentation

They bridge the gap between specialist consultations and lawful possession of prescribed cannabis medicines for patients who otherwise would find accessing these products prohibitively complicated.

*Takeaway: Specialist pharmacies are key to legally obtaining medical cannabis in the UK.*

## Final Thoughts

In summary, possession of cannabis in the UK is illegal except under tight exceptions created by obtaining a lawful medical cannabis prescription from a specialist doctor. The legal landscape changed positively in November 2018, allowing cannabis-based medicines to be scheduled for medical use, but broad recreational or unregulated possession remains a criminal offence.

If you're considering medical cannabis, the critical steps are to consult a specialist authorised to prescribe, and to obtain your product through a legitimate pharmacy like Nationwide Pharmacies. Navigating these requirements is essential to stay within legal boundaries, so never rely on hearsay or misinformation.

Understanding the distinction between Class and Schedule, and the limits of NHS access, prevents misunderstanding and reduces the risk of illegal possession.

**Remember:** Medical cannabis is lawful in the UK only under very specific, tightly regulated circumstances — not freely legalised or decriminalised.

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