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Prescribed cannabis in the UK remains an area often clouded by misunderstandings, especially around terms like “unlicensed imports.” Whether you're a patient, healthcare professional, or simply curious, understanding how unlicensed imports impact availability, pricing, and treatment quality is crucial. This post dives deep into what unlicensed imports truly mean, why UK prescribed cannabis is vaporized rather than smoked, and how pharmacy regulations ensure safe, consistent care.

## Understanding ‘Unlicensed Imports’ in UK Prescribed Cannabis

First off, let's decode the term “unlicensed imports.” In the UK, most licensed medicines have a Marketing Authorisation (a license) from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). This licence confirms that the medicine meets strict standards for safety, quality, and efficacy.

**Unlicensed medicines** lack this formal MHRA licence but can still be prescribed when licensed alternatives aren't suitable or available. “Imports” means these medicines are brought into the UK from overseas manufacturers because no licensed UK version exists.

*In short:* An **unlicensed import** is a medicine brought from abroad without a UK marketing authorization but prescribed legally under specific circumstances.

## Why UK Prescribed Cannabis Is Almost Always Vaporized, Not Smoked

One common myth is that prescribed cannabis is “smoked” like recreational cannabis. This is simply not the case. UK clinicians prescribe vaporised cannabis preparations, which means the plant or extract is heated to release cannabinoids as a vapor without combustion.

**Why is this important?** Combustion (burning) releases harmful by-products like tar and carcinogens. Vaporisation avoids combustion, delivering cannabinoids with fewer toxins.



- **Combustion by-products:** smoke contains carbon monoxide, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and other harmful chemicals.

- **Vaporisation:** heats cannabis just enough to release active compounds, so patients inhale vapor, not smoke.

This distinction is critical because the NHS and prescribing physicians want to minimize harm. Vaporisers, therefore, are a part of the treatment itself—not just a delivery device.

## Device as Part of Treatment: Why Consistency Matters

Unlike over-the-counter products, prescribed cannabis treatment involves using specific vaporiser devices approved for clinical use. This isn't just about convenience or preference. The **device impacts dosing consistency**, absorption rates, and ultimately, treatment effectiveness.



Regular pharmacies dispensing unlicensed cannabis imports usually provide compatible vaporiser devices or detailed guidance on which devices patients should use. This relationship between medicinal product and device is crucial enough that the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) oversees such dispensing practices to protect patients.

## Pharmacy and GPhC Regulation in Dispensing Unlicensed Cannabis Imports

Dispensing unlicensed medicines isn't a "free-for-all." The General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC), which regulates community pharmacies in the UK, requires pharmacies to have robust systems for sourcing, storing, and supplying unlicensed imports safely. Pharmacists must:

1. Ensure products come from trusted overseas suppliers with good manufacturing practices.
2. Verify product quality before dispensing.
3. Counsel patients thoroughly about dosing, storage, and use—especially the vaporiser device.
4. Maintain accurate and complete records for traceability.

This regulatory framework means that despite "unlicensed" status, patients receive medicines with appropriate safeguards applied.

## Stock Variability: Why Availability Can Fluctuate

One major impact of relying on unlicensed imports <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/lifestyle/health/how-medical-cannabis-vaping-works-temperature-devices-and-the-economics-behind-it-409054/> for prescribed cannabis is **stock variability**. Unlike licensed UK medicines with large, stable local manufacturing or multiple suppliers, unlicensed imports depend on overseas production and shipping. This dependency introduces variability on several fronts:

- **Manufacturing capacity:** Some manufacturers produce limited batches for medical cannabis, so stock levels can vary.
- **Regulatory changes:** Updates in customs or import rules can temporarily halt shipments.
- **Shipping delays:** International logistics are vulnerable to disruptions like port strikes, weather, or pandemic-related delays.

So, patients and pharmacists must often manage fluctuating availability, sometimes needing to adjust prescriptions or try alternative products.

## Currency Exposure and Price Fluctuations

Unlicensed imported cannabis is priced in foreign currencies, often US dollars or euros. This exposes UK prescribers, pharmacies, and patients to currency fluctuation risks. These daily market changes can cause price swings on top of regular costs.

For example:

|          |                              |                                |                                    |
|----------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Currency | £1 GBP Equivalent (Jan 2024) | £1 GBP Equivalent (April 2024) | Price Impact                       |
| USD      | 1.21                         | 1.30                           | Up to 7.4% increase in import cost |
| EUR      | 1.12                         | 1.18                           | Up to 5.4% increase in import cost |

Because many cannabis medicines are imported priced in USD or EUR, a weakening of the pound increases import costs, ultimately affecting pharmacy prices and patient expenses.

## Summary: What This Means for Patients and the NHS

- **Unlicensed imports**
- **Vaporisation is the gold standard**
- **The device is not optional; it is a key part of treatment, controlled and supported by pharmacists under GPhC regulations.**
- **Stock variability happens because unlicensed cannabis comes from overseas producers, coupled with shipping and regulatory hurdles.**
- **Currency exposure causes price swings, leading to fluctuating treatment costs.**

For NHS prescribers, pharmacists, and patients, understanding these factors helps set realistic expectations about availability and cost. Importantly, it reminds us that prescribed cannabis is managed, regulated healthcare—not unregulated recreational use.

## Final Remarks: The Future of UK Prescribed Cannabis

The current UK landscape—a reliance on unlicensed, imported cannabis products—reflects the early stage of medical cannabis integration into healthcare. Future licensing and local manufacturing partnerships could reduce price volatility and supply interruptions. Until then, safeguarding patient safety and treatment consistency through careful pharmacy regulation and education remains the top priority.

If you are a patient prescribed medicinal cannabis, always liaise closely with your specialist prescriber and dispensing pharmacy. They can guide you on how to use vaporiser devices correctly, what to expect in terms of stock and pricing, and how to report any issues.

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