Short answer: in the UK, a cannabis-based product for medicinal use (CBPM) can generally be prescribed only by a doctor who is on the General Medical Council's (GMC) specialist register and is acting as a specialist in the relevant field. A GP cannot start a CBPM prescription. That remains true even if a patient has a diagnosis, has tried other treatments or has obtained cannabis elsewhere.

It helps to be precise about what "legal" means. The rules differ for **possession**, **prescribing** and the **supply chain**. A specialist's prescription may make possession and use of the specific prescribed product lawful for that patient. It does not make recreational cannabis legal, authorise self-prescribing or permit someone to buy or import cannabis from an unregulated source.

This guide explains the 2018 rule change, who may prescribe, how NHS and private access differ, and what to check before approaching a clinic.

What changed in 2018?

On 1 November 2018, the UK rescheduled certain cannabis-based products for medicinal use. They moved from Schedule 1 to Schedule 2 of the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001. In practical terms, this allowed eligible specialist doctors to prescribe qualifying CBPMs for medicinal use. It did **not** legalise cannabis generally or create a general right for patients to obtain it.

The change followed a review by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and public cases involving children with severe epilepsy. Before the change, cannabis products were generally treated as having no recognised medical use under the relevant controlled-drug rules. After it, a narrow route to prescribing became possible within a regulated system.

The 2018 change is sometimes described too broadly as "legalising medical cannabis". A more accurate description is that it created a specialist prescribing route for qualifying products, with safeguards. The product must meet the legal definition of a CBPM, and prescribing remains subject to controlled-drug rules and professional standards.

Who can prescribe a CBPM?

The central rule is that a CBPM prescription must be made by a **doctor on the GMC specialist register**, acting in their capacity as a specialist. The doctor should have relevant expertise in the condition being treated and make an individual clinical decision about whether the medicine is appropriate.



In everyday searches, people may use the phrase “specialist doctor cannabis UK”. The important check is not simply whether a doctor works at a cannabis clinic or has an interest in cannabis medicine. Check that the prescriber is a doctor, is listed on the GMC specialist register, and is practising within a relevant specialty.

What does “on the GMC specialist register” mean?

The GMC maintains the specialist register for doctors who have completed recognised specialist training or an accepted equivalent route. You can search the GMC’s online medical register to confirm a doctor’s registration and whether they appear on the specialist register. Check the individual prescriber, not just the clinic’s website or marketing material.

Clinics may also describe their doctors as consultants. That title alone is not the regulatory check: verify the doctor’s GMC status and specialty directly. You can also ask the clinic which specialist will assess you and who will make the prescribing decision.

Does a GP prescribe medical cannabis?

A GP cannot initiate a CBPM prescription under the specialist-only rule. A GP may be involved in a patient’s wider care, receive information from a specialist or discuss medicines and symptoms. In some circumstances, a specialist may propose a shared-care arrangement, but this does not make the GP the person theukrules.co who independently starts treatment. In practice, many GPs are not able or willing to take on CBPM prescribing, so patients should not assume their GP will issue repeats.

If you are considering a private clinic, tell your GP and relevant specialists where appropriate. Keeping your NHS care team informed can help avoid fragmented records or uncertainty about other medicines, but it does not oblige a GP to prescribe a private clinic’s treatment.

What are the CBMP prescribing rules?

The phrase **“CBMP prescribing rules”** covers more than the doctor’s registration. A specialist should consider the patient’s diagnosis, clinical history, previous treatments, likely benefits and risks, and the

available evidence. The decision should be made for the individual rather than offered as a guaranteed outcome for everyone with a particular condition.



Many CBPMs are unlicensed medicines, sometimes called “specials”. An unlicensed medicine is not automatically unlawful or unsuitable, but it has not received a marketing authorisation for that specific product and indication in the same way as a licensed medicine. The prescriber has professional responsibilities to explain why it is being considered and to oversee treatment.

Doctors are expected to consider appropriate options before prescribing an unlicensed CBPM. The 2018 change was not intended to make cannabis-based medicines a first-line option for every condition. Prescribers should follow relevant professional guidance and make a reasoned clinical decision, including whether the expected benefit justifies the risks and uncertainty.

Question What to check Who makes the decision? A doctor on the GMC specialist register, acting as a specialist. Is the product lawful? It must be a qualifying CBPM supplied through the appropriate regulated route and prescribed for you. Is it guaranteed? No. The specialist assesses your circumstances and may decide that treatment is not suitable. Can my GP start it? No. A GP cannot independently initiate a CBPM prescription under the specialist-only rule.

What remains illegal or restricted?

Rescheduling did not remove the wider controls on cannabis. The following distinctions matter:

- **Recreational use:** recreational possession and supply of cannabis remain illegal in the UK. A medical prescription is not permission to possess cannabis for non-medical purposes.
- **Self-prescribing:** patients cannot prescribe cannabis to themselves. A recommendation from a friend, an online questionnaire or a product bought without a valid prescription is not a substitute for assessment by an eligible specialist.
- **Unlawful supply:** buying from an unregulated seller, sharing prescribed medicine or supplying it to another person may create serious legal and safety risks. A prescription is personal and product-specific.

- **Importing without authorisation:** bringing cannabis products into the UK without the required permissions can be unlawful, even if the product was bought legally abroad. Rules for controlled medicines when travelling are specific; check current requirements with the Home Office and relevant authorities before travel.
- **Smoking:** smoking cannabis is not an authorised route for taking a prescribed CBPM. Do not assume that a prescription permits smoking a product. Follow the prescriber's directions and the product's instructions.

Here's what kills me: smoking and vaping are not interchangeable terms. Some prescribed products may be intended for administration using a compatible vaporiser, but that does not mean every product can be vaped or that vaping is risk-free. Use only the product and method directed by the prescriber. If you are uncertain about travel, driving, work or a device, ask your specialist or pharmacist for advice specific to your prescription.

NHS access versus private access

NHS prescribing

NHS access is possible, but narrow. NHS guidance and commissioning decisions limit routine use to specific circumstances. NICE recommendations include certain cannabis-based medicines for particular indications, including specific forms of severe epilepsy, chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, and multiple sclerosis spasticity. The exact medicine, diagnosis and criteria matter; a condition being on a broad list does not automatically mean an NHS prescription will be offered.

In practice, a patient usually needs assessment by an appropriate NHS specialist. The specialist considers whether the relevant NICE criteria and local arrangements are met, and whether other suitable treatments have been tried. If you think you may qualify, ask the specialist managing your condition about the applicable NICE guidance and local NHS pathway. Your GP can help with referral or coordination, but cannot initiate the CBPM prescription.

Private clinics

Private clinics may offer assessment by a specialist and may consider a wider range of circumstances than routine NHS commissioning. That does not mean they can bypass the legal rules, guarantee a prescription or prescribe without a proper clinical assessment. The specialist remains responsible for deciding whether treatment is appropriate.

For example, Releaf is one company people may encounter when researching private cannabis clinics. Treat any provider's claims as a starting point for questions, not proof that you will be eligible or that treatment will work. Ask about the prescriber, assessment process, follow-up, product, pharmacy arrangements and the full ongoing cost. Private care is generally paid for by the patient, and costs can vary with the clinic, medicine, dose and monitoring needed.

Before booking, use this short checklist:

- Can the clinic name the doctor who would assess you?
- Can you verify that doctor on the GMC register and confirm specialist-register status?
- Does the clinic explain that a prescription is not guaranteed?
- Are assessment, medicine, follow-up and any additional charges explained separately?

- What happens if treatment is ineffective or causes side effects?
- How will the clinic communicate with your NHS team, if appropriate?

How to check a clinic's claims

Online research can help, but different tools answer different questions. **Trustpilot** can show customer reviews and recurring themes about communication or service. Reviews are not a clinical audit: they cannot confirm that a prescriber is appropriately registered, that a treatment is suitable, or that a clinic's outcomes apply to you. Look at the pattern and date of reviews, and remember that people who post may not represent all patients.

SimilarWeb can provide estimates of a website's traffic and audience sources. It does not verify medical quality, legal compliance or the accuracy of a clinic's claims. Use it to understand online visibility, not as a substitute for checking credentials or asking clinical questions.

If you have a legal question about possession, travel, employment or a dispute with a provider, a solicitor can explain how the rules apply to your situation. Irwin Mitchell solicitors, for example, provide legal services and information; speaking to a law firm is distinct from getting clinical advice from a prescriber. For regulatory checks, consult the GMC and current government guidance directly.

Questions to ask before agreeing to treatment

1. **What is the clinical reason for considering this product?** Ask what evidence and alternatives the specialist has considered in your case.
2. **What exactly is being prescribed?** Confirm the product, formulation, directions and dispensing arrangements.
3. **What monitoring and follow-up are included?** Ask who to contact about side effects, dose changes or lack of benefit.
4. **What will it cost over time?** Request a breakdown that includes consultations, medicine and follow-up, rather than relying on a headline price.
5. **What are the rules for my circumstances?** Ask about driving, travel, work policies and how to store the medicine securely.

The bottom line

Since 1 November 2018, UK law has allowed a limited route for prescribing qualifying cannabis-based products for medicinal use. The key rule is specialist-only prescribing: the doctor must be on the GMC specialist register and act as a specialist. GPs cannot start a CBPM prescription, NHS access remains restricted, and private clinics still have to follow professional and legal safeguards.

Before acting, separate three questions: **Is the product legally prescribed to me? Is it being supplied through a lawful route? What rules apply to possessing, using or travelling with it?** Checking those details is safer than relying on the broad claim that medical cannabis is "fully legal" in the UK.