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If you've been following news about medical cannabis in the United Kingdom, you might have noticed some articles confidently stating that "medical cannabis is legalised." Yet, many patients, healthcare professionals, and even pharmacists like those at **Nationwide Pharmacies** will tell you the situation is far more nuanced. This article aims to clear up the confusion, explaining the distinction between legal terms, what truly changed in November 2018, and why cannabis remains mostly illegal under UK law.

## Understanding the Core Confusion: Class vs Schedule

One key reason why confusion persists is a fundamental misunderstanding of two legal classifications: *Class* and *Schedule*. These terms come from separate but related drug control frameworks in the UK.

### What Are Drug Classes?

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MDA 1971) categorises controlled substances into *Classes A, B, and C*, depending on their perceived harm and penalties associated with misuse. Cannabis itself is classified as a **Class B** drug, meaning possession and supply remain criminal offences with significant punishments.

- **Class A:** Includes heroin and cocaine, with the highest penalties.
- **Class B:** Includes cannabis, amphetamines, with moderate-level penalties.
- **Class C:** Includes benzodiazepines and anabolic steroids, with lower penalties.

### What Are Drug Schedules?

Drug scheduling is a separate system governed by the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001. It controls which substances may be prescribed and supplied for medical use. Medicines are placed into Schedules 1 to 5 based on their recognised medical uses and controls required.

- **Schedule 1:** Substances with no recognised medicinal value and strict controls (e.g., LSD).
- **Schedule 2:** Controlled drugs with recognised medical uses but high potential for abuse (e.g., morphine).
- **Schedule 3-5:** Gradually less controlled substances.

Both the Misuse of Drugs Act and the Misuse of Drugs Regulations must be considered when discussing cannabis legality, but they are often conflated, which fuels misunderstanding.

## What Changed in November 2018?

In November 2018, the UK government made a targeted but narrow regulatory update: **cannabis-based products for medicinal use were reclassified from Schedule 1 to Schedule 2**. This made such products legally prescribable by specialist doctors.

Importantly, this *did not* change cannabis's status under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which means its Class B status, and related criminal penalties for unauthorised possession and supply, remained intact.

### Why the Schedule Reclassification Matters

Before November 2018, cannabis medicines were Schedule 1, meaning they were viewed as having no medical use and couldn't be prescribed. The reclassification opened the door for specialist doctors to prescribe cannabis

medicines legally — but only under tight controls.

This was the first time any form of cannabis was legally prescribable on the NHS or privately in the UK. For companies like **Nationwide Pharmacies**, this meant they could finally legally dispense cannabis-based medicines prescribed by specialists.

## Common Misreporting and the 'Legalisation' Misnomer

Many media outlets misreported this schedule reclassification as “legalisation” of medical cannabis. Yet, “legalisation” implies broad legal access without criminal penalties, which is not the case. The 2018 change was more accurately a **de-scheduling or re-scheduling for a narrow medicinal purpose**, not a legalisation of cannabis itself.

This misreporting is what I call a *misreporting-narrow change* problem: narrow regulatory shifts are exaggerated to suggest much broader legal changes, which can mislead patients and practitioners.

## Why Cannabis Remains Illegal Under the 1971 Act

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 remains the backbone of criminal drug law in the UK. Cannabis remains a Class B substance <https://www.tntmagazine.com/leisure-entertainment/leisure/why-is-cannabis-still-illegal-in-the-uk-the-history-behind-medical-cannabis-law/> under this Act, carrying penalties of up to 5 years imprisonment, an unlimited fine, or both for possession, and up to 14 years for supply and production.

This means that any cannabis held, supplied, or used outside strict medicinal regulations remains illegal. Home growing or possession without a prescription can lead to prosecution.

## Difference Between Legalisation and Decriminalisation

It's important to distinguish **legalisation** from **decriminalisation**. Legalisation means the drug is lawful to possess and supply without penalty; decriminalisation means penalties are reduced or removed but the substance is still technically illegal.

Currently, neither full legalisation nor decriminalisation applies to cannabis in the UK.



# Specialist-Only Prescribing: Why Access Remains Limited

Following the Schedule 2 reclassification, cannabis-based medicines can only be prescribed by specialist doctors — typically consultants in neurologists, palliative care, or pain management — who are familiar with extracting maximum benefit while managing risks.



The UK's National Health Service (NHS) still restricts access tightly, primarily due to:

1. **Limited high-quality evidence:** Although promising, clinical studies on cannabis as medicine are fewer and less conclusive than for many other treatments.
2. **Cost and commissioning hurdles:** NHS trusts decide whether to fund cannabis medicines on a case-by-case basis, which varies regionally.
3. **Lack of prescriber education and familiarity:** Many GPs and non-specialists are unfamiliar or uncomfortable prescribing cannabis.

## The Role of Specialist Pharmacies

Companies like **Nationwide Pharmacies** support these specialist prescriptions by supplying cannabis-based medicinal products that comply with all legal requirements. They ensure quality and safe supply for patients legally entitled to treatment.

These pharmacies also navigate the complex regulatory framework so patients and specialists can access licensed cannabis medicines with confidence.

## Summary Table: Cannabis Legal Status and Regulation in the UK

| Aspect                                               | Before November 2018                                   | After November 2018                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Notes                                                | Misuse of Drugs Act classification Class B             | Class B Still illegal to possess/supply without licence |
| Misuse of Drugs Regulations                          | scheduling Schedule 1 (no medical use, unprescribable) | Schedule 2 (prescribable by specialists)                |
| Enables legal prescriptions of cannabis medicines    | Prescribing Not permitted anywhere                     | Permitted only by specialist consultants                |
| General practitioners cannot prescribe               | Access level None                                      | Very limited and specialist-only                        |
| NHS funding is limited, private prescriptions costly |                                                        |                                                         |

## Takeaway

While the schedule reclassification in November 2018 permitted specialist doctors to prescribe cannabis-based medicines legally, cannabis itself remains a Class B illegal drug under the 1971 Act. The media's claim that medical cannabis is fully legalised glosses over crucial legal distinctions and access limitations — leaving many patients frustrated but hopeful. Specialist pharmacies like Nationwide Pharmacies play a vital role in helping navigate this tightly regulated medical landscape.

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