

With rising public interest and media attention, you may wonder whether medical cannabis can be prescribed to children anywhere in the UK. It's a complex question that deserves a careful, nuanced answer. Medical cannabis is not a simple "cure-all," especially when it comes to children or neurodevelopmental differences like autism. This guide unwraps the facts, clarifies the rules, and explains why only certain paediatric specialists can prescribe these products — and even then, only within very narrow clinical indications.

Setting the Scene: What Symptom or Condition Are We Talking About?

Before discussing who can prescribe medical cannabis to children, it's crucial to define the symptom or condition in question. Medical cannabis products are often promoted for a range of issues, but the **treatment target matters critically**. Are we talking about autism itself, or are we referring to a co-occurring condition such as epilepsy or severe behavior symptoms?

Key clarification:

- **Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition** characterized by differences in social communication and behavior patterns. It is NOT an illness or disease and does not currently have licensed cannabis-based treatments.
- **Co-occurring conditions** (e.g., epilepsy, anxiety, behavioral challenges) can sometimes be targets of clinical treatments, including very specific cannabis-based products under tight regulation.

Many claims around "treating autism with cannabis" are vague or lack credible measurement plans. These are exactly the kinds of statements the NICE guidance library advises caution about, as they emphasize rigorous, evidence-based outcomes.

Who Can Legally Prescribe Medical Cannabis in the UK?

Since November 2018, medical cannabis has been legally prescribable in the UK. But there are strict limits:

- Only doctors on the **GMC Specialist Register** can prescribe medical cannabis products (MCPs). This means general practitioners and many junior doctors cannot legally initiate these prescriptions.
- The prescriber must be a **paediatric specialist** for prescribing to children, usually in a hospital setting or specialist clinic.
- Prescriptions for children tend to be reserved for **exceptional, treatment-resistant conditions** with existing evidence support.

The **General Medical Council (GMC)** regulates doctors and their prescribing powers carefully. Unlike some countries where a broader range of practitioners might authorize cannabis, in the UK the rules are intentionally narrow to protect vulnerable populations like children.

What Does NICE Say About Medical Cannabis for Children?

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has published clear guidance on cannabis-based medicinal products, focusing on the evidence base and safety considerations.

NICE's stance includes:



- Medical cannabis is **not recommended for treating autism spectrum disorder (ASD)** itself, due to insufficient evidence of benefit and concerns about safety and dosing.
- There is cautious acceptance for specific, rare epilepsy syndromes that cause treatment-resistant seizures, notably **Dravet syndrome** and **Lennox-Gastaut syndrome**.
- NICE guidance prioritizes licensed cannabis-based medicines *where available* and carefully evaluates unlicensed cannabis products case by case.

In fact, NICE's technology appraisals and clinical guidelines can be consulted in their public Guidance Library to review the evidence base behind these recommendations.

Important: What NICE Does **Not** Recommend

Condition Recommendation on Medical Cannabis Rationale Autism Spectrum Disorder **Not recommended** No robust clinical trial evidence showing benefit; risks unknown in children General Behavioral Challenges in Autism **Not recommended** Lack of standardized evidence; behavior management approaches preferred Epilepsy - Dravet and Lennox-Gastaut Syndromes **Recommended in limited cases** Evidence of seizure reduction in treatment-resistant epilepsy has been demonstrated Other Epilepsy Syndromes **Not generally recommended** Insufficient evidence supporting efficacy or safety

Narrow Epilepsy Indications: The Main Paediatric Use Case

When considering children, the only widely accepted NHS indication for medical cannabis is treatment-resistant epilepsy syndromes. Two rare but severe epilepsies have been studied with some promising results:

1. **Dravet Syndrome:** A rare genetic epilepsy starting in infancy, marked by prolonged seizures.
2. **Lennox-Gastaut Syndrome:** A difficult-to-treat childhood epilepsy associated with multiple seizure types and developmental delays.

For these syndromes, specific cannabis-based medicinal products like *licensed cannabidiol (CBD) preparations* have received NICE appraisal. These medications have demonstrated seizure frequency reduction in rigorous clinical trials.

Outside of these syndromes, evidence <https://londoninsider.co.uk/medical-cannabis-and-autism-what-london-families-should-know/> is limited or lacking, leaving prescribing largely off-label, experimental, or unlicensed.

Unlicensed Cannabis Products: What Are They and Why the Concern?

Many "medical cannabis" products available online or in dispensaries are **unlicensed cannabis products**. These products have not undergone the full regulatory scrutiny by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) or NICE to confirm:

- Consistent dosing
- Safety profiles
- Known side effects, especially in the vulnerable pediatric population

For children, especially, unlicensed products pose significant risks due to unknown purity and concentration. The NHS and NICE recommend extreme caution, and only specialist prescribers should consider these products—and only if licensed alternatives are unavailable, and with full informed consent.

Understanding the Evidence Limits and Placebo Effects

The evidence base for medical cannabis remains limited and evolving. For many claimed indications, including behavioral symptoms in autism, data tend to be:

- Based on small, uncontrolled studies or anecdotal reports.
- Not peer-reviewed or replicated in large randomized controlled trials.
- Subject to placebo effects — where expectations of benefit can alter observed outcomes.

Because children with neurological or developmental differences are especially vulnerable, clinical caution means that subjective reports like "seems calmer" are insufficient grounds for regular prescribing. NICE advocates for measurable, reliable outcome assessments to evaluate any treatment's true impact.



Checklist: What to Know Before Considering Medical Cannabis for a Child

1. **Identify the condition or symptom:** Are you targeting epilepsy (narrow syndromes) or non-epilepsy symptoms such as autism-related behaviors?
2. **Consult a paediatric specialist:** Only a GMC-registered specialist with experience in paediatric neurology or related fields can consider medical cannabis prescriptions.
3. **Check NICE guidance:** Is there a relevant guideline recommending cannabis use for this condition?
4. **Discuss licensed options first:** Preference is given to licensed cannabis medicines with known efficacy and safety profiles.
5. **Understand the risks of unlicensed products:** Avoid products without regulatory approval due to unknown safety.
6. **Request a clear monitoring and measurement plan:** To detect benefits and side effects objectively over time.

Final Thoughts

In summary, **no, not just any doctor can prescribe medical cannabis to a child in the UK**. Prescriptions must come from GMC Specialist Register paediatricians or other qualified specialists, and typically only for specific, rare epilepsy syndromes like Dravet or Lennox-Gastaut.

Medical cannabis is **not currently recommended by NICE** for the treatment of autism or most of its co-occurring behavioral symptoms. The evidence remains insufficient, and safety concerns prevail. Parents and caregivers should be wary of providers or companies offering broad "autism treatment" claims without substantiated data or specialist involvement.

Always consult healthcare professionals with paediatric expertise who understand the current UK regulations, NICE guidelines, and the limitations of unlicensed cannabis products before considering any form of treatment involving medical cannabis for children.

Further reading:

- NICE guideline on cannabis-based medicinal products
- GMC Specialist Register
- NICE Guidance Library