

Chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting (CINV) remains one of the most challenging side effects faced by cancer patients. While modern antiemetics have significantly improved symptom control, some patients continue to struggle despite standard treatments. One medication sometimes discussed as an **add-on antiemetic treatment** is *nabilone*, a synthetic cannabinoid that has shown potential for alleviating nausea and vomiting.

In this blog post, we'll unravel the complex question: **Can the NHS prescribe nabilone for chemotherapy nausea?** We'll cover the key themes surrounding this question, including the impact of the 2018 rescheduling of cannabis-based medicines, NHS funding versus legal prescribing, specialist-only prescribing rules, and NHS caution around unlicensed cannabis-based medicines.



We'll also highlight useful resources such as medicalcannabis.co.uk and releaf.co.uk to help patients and clinicians navigate this evolving area.

What Is Nabilone?

Nabilone is a synthetic cannabinoid, chemically similar to tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) — the main psychoactive compound in cannabis. It was developed in the 1980s to treat nausea and vomiting, primarily in cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. Nabilone acts on cannabinoid receptors in the brain to reduce the sensation of nausea.

2018 Rescheduling: What Changed for Cannabis-Based Medicines?

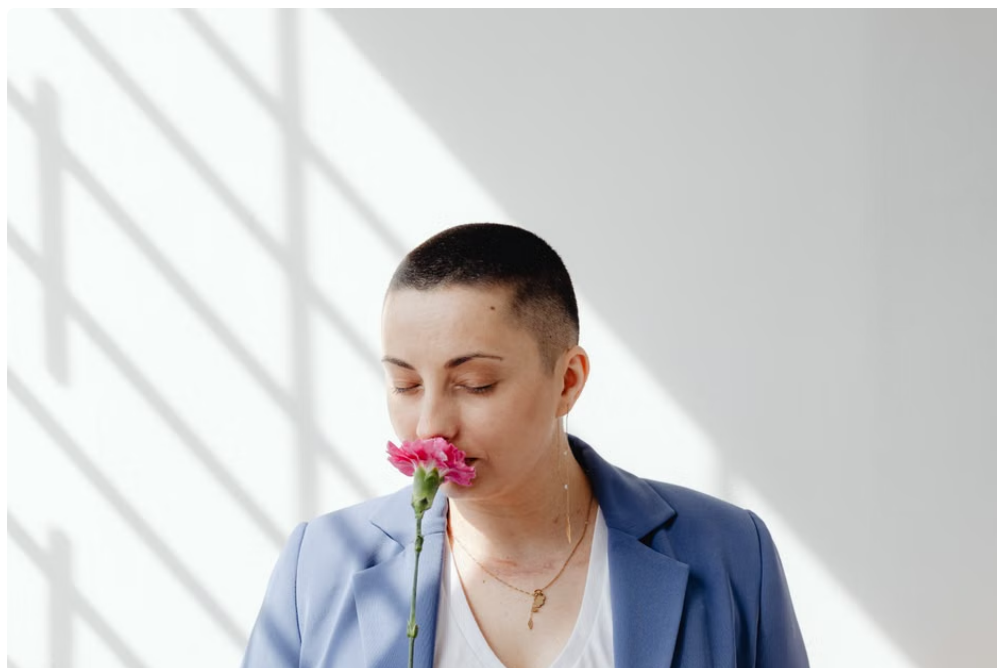
Before 2018, cannabis-based products were mostly classified as Schedule 1 drugs in the UK — meaning they were considered to have no medicinal value and were not legally prescribable on the NHS.

However, a significant policy change occurred on **1 November 2018** when the UK government rescheduled cannabis-based products for medicinal use from Schedule 1 to Schedule 2. This reclassification allowed specialist doctors to legally prescribe cannabis-based medicinal products (CBMPs), under strict conditions.

Crucially, though, nabilone—as a licensed medicinal product—was not directly impacted by this rescheduling. Nabilone had already been licensed and available for prescription, but the rescheduling mainly opened doors for unlicensed CBMPs derived from the cannabis plant, such as cannabidiol (CBD) oils and herbal cannabis extracts.

Legal Prescribing vs NHS Funding: Two Separate Hurdles

This is a key distinction that often trips up patients and even some healthcare professionals:



- **Legal prescribing** means a medicine can be prescribed lawfully by a doctor.
- **NHS funding**

Just because a medicine is legally prescribable does not mean the NHS will routinely fund it. And not being routinely funded usually means patients must either pay out-of-pocket or access the medicine through specialist routes such as clinical trials or individual funding requests.

Nabilone and NHS Funding

Nabilone is officially licensed for the treatment of chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting as a second-line or add-on antiemetic therapy when standard treatments have failed. Despite this, NHS funding for nabilone is scarce and inconsistent across regions because it is often not included in local formularies or commissioning agreements.

For example, some NHS hospital trusts may have nabilone listed for specific indications, whereas others may not routinely stock or fund it. This lack of uniform policy means access depends heavily on local decisions and clinician willingness.

Specialist-Only Prescribing Rules

Because nabilone is a specialist medication with potential side effects — including dizziness, sedation, and psychoactive effects — prescribing is typically restricted to specialists such as oncologists or palliative care physicians experienced in chemotherapy support.

Primary care doctors (GPs) usually do not initiate nabilone treatment and may only prescribe it under shared care arrangements if agreed upon by the specialist.

Implications for Patients

1. Patients must generally be referred to a specialist who can assess whether nabilone is appropriate as an add-on antiemetic treatment.

2. Prescribing is usually reserved for patients whose nausea and vomiting have not adequately responded to standard antiemetics like ondansetron or metoclopramide.
3. Monitoring is required to manage potential side effects and effectiveness.

Unlicensed Cannabis-Based Medicines and NHS Caution

Besides licensed drugs like nabilone, there's been growing interest in unlicensed cannabis-based medicines (CBMPs), especially those derived directly from the cannabis plant. However, NHS England guidelines remain cautious.

Current NHS guidance states:

- CBMPs are prescribed only by specialists in exceptional circumstances.
- There must be adequate evidence for clinical benefit and safety.
- Prescribing unlicensed CBMPs is not widespread and often requires case-by-case approval.

For patients considering exploration of such options, it's important to use reputable sources such as medicalcannabis.co.uk, which hosts a directory of vergemagazine.co.uk UK clinics offering CBMP assessments, and relaef.co.uk, which explains the legal and medical framework around cannabis-based medicines.

Summary: Can the NHS Prescribe Nabilone for Chemotherapy Nausea?

Aspect Details **Legal prescribing** Yes, nabilone is a licensed medicine legally prescribable by NHS specialists for chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, usually as second-line add-on treatment. **NHS funding**

Inconsistent; not routinely funded or stocked in all NHS trusts. Access varies geographically and depends on local formulary inclusion and clinician decision-making. **Who can prescribe** Specialist clinicians only, typically

oncologists or palliative care doctors experienced in chemotherapy support. **Rescheduling impact** 2018

rescheduling allowed specialist prescribing of cannabis-based medicinal products overall but did not directly

change nabilone's status, which was already licensed. **Unlicensed cannabis-based medicines** Hygienic caution

and strict specialist-only prescribing; these are generally not prescribed routinely by the NHS.

What This Means for Patients

If you are undergoing chemotherapy and struggling with nausea despite standard antiemetic treatments, it is worth discussing the possibility of nabilone with your specialist team. Although the NHS can prescribe it, whether you can access it on NHS funding will depend on your local services.

Be aware that accessing cannabis-based medicines remains heavily regulated, and the NHS is cautious due to limited robust evidence. If you're interested in options beyond licensed medicines like nabilone, specialised clinics listed on medicalcannabis.co.uk can offer private assessments and information.

Key Takeaways

- **Nabilone is legally prescribable on the NHS for chemotherapy-induced nausea not controlled by standard antiemetics.**
- **NHS funding for nabilone is not guaranteed and depends on local formularies — patients might not get it free everywhere.**

- **Only specialists initiate and manage nabilone due to side effect profile and specialist monitoring needs.**
- **The 2018 rescheduling improved legal access for cannabis products overall but didn't change nabilone's licensing.**
- **Unlicensed cannabis-based medicines remain niche, specialist-only prescriptions with NHS caution; private clinics are an alternative route.**

For more information about nabilone, cannabinoids, and chemotherapy nausea management, visit releaf.co.uk for clear, patient-focused explanations.

References

- UK Government announcement on cannabis rescheduling, 2018
- medicalcannabis.co.uk - UK clinic directory and guidance
- releaf.co.uk - Educational resource on cannabis-based medicinal products