

Interest in cannabis-based medicines is growing fast across the UK. More patients and public alike are curious — what's the difference between cannabis medicines prescribed under medical supervision and the wide range of cannabis-derived products available online?

In this guide, I'll walk you through the key distinctions, focusing on quality control, specialist monitoring, and the [monitoring treatment outcomes](#) vital role of assessment before starting treatment. I'll also explain why simply looking at upfront costs misses the bigger picture, especially when thinking about a course of treatment over months, not just the first appointment.

This isn't about hype or broad claims. I'll link to reliable sources, like NHS guidance pages and real clinic websites, including trusted providers like Releaf. Whether you're considering prescribed cannabis medicine or tempted by online options, this post will help you make an informed choice.

Understanding Cannabis-Based Medical Treatments in the UK

First, some basics. In the UK, cannabis-based products for medicinal use (often called CBPM) are tightly regulated. Since November 2018, specialist doctors can prescribe cannabis medicines legally in specific situations.

These are prescription medicines, obtained legally through a pharmacy, with a focus on verified quality, safety, and dosage instructions. This is very different from the growing market of cannabis products you see advertised online or in some shops, many of which are unregulated or sold as supplements.

Why Medical History and Specialist Assessment Matter

The starting point for prescribed cannabis medicines is always a thorough specialist assessment. This happens through a clinic appointment — for example, at services like Releaf or hospital trusts outlined by the NHS.

- **Detailed medical history:** Doctors will review your existing conditions, previous treatments, and medications. This matters because cannabis medicines can interact with other treatments and aren't suitable for everyone.
- **Confirming diagnosis:** Cannabis medicines are currently prescribed for a small set of health conditions like certain types of epilepsy, spasticity in multiple sclerosis, and chemotherapy-induced nausea.
- **Risk assessment:** Your doctor weighs potential benefits against risks like side effects or dependency, ensuring the treatment is appropriate for your unique situation.

In contrast, online products require no medical assessment — which can lead to inappropriate use, wasted money, or even harm. Many products marketed online don't specify dosing or list ingredients fully, so you're left guessing what you're actually taking.

Quality Control: Prescriptions Follow Strict Standards

One huge difference is the quality assurance process behind prescribed cannabis medicines.

Aspect	Prescribed Cannabis Medicines	Online Cannabis Products
Regulation	Regulated by MHRA (Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency)	Often unregulated or sold as food supplements
Manufacturing	Manufactured to pharmaceutical standards	No standardisation or licensing
Ingredients	Exact THC/CBD composition clearly stated	Ingredient transparency often lacking
Claims	Claims may be vague or inaccurate	Quality control tests often missing
Testing	Batch testing for purity, contaminants, consistency	No guaranteed testing
Risks	Low risks of contaminants or variable strength	High risks of contaminants or variable strength
Legal status	Legal with prescription, per UK law	Often legal grey area or outright illegal if containing THC

In short: prescribed cannabis medicines offer you a guarantee that what's inside the medicine is known, safe, and consistent. Products sold online can't offer that, and many contain unknown or unverified substances, posing health risks or legal issues.

Follow-Up and Monitoring: A Core Part of Treatment

The care pathways set out by the NHS make it clear that prescribing cannabis medicines is not a one-off transaction. It includes ongoing follow-up and monitoring by healthcare specialists.

- **Monitoring effectiveness:** Doctors check regularly if symptoms improve, stay the same, or get worse, adjusting doses accordingly.
- **Side effect tracking:** Patients are supported to report any adverse events or new symptoms as treatment continues.
- **Coordination with other treatments:** Medicine plans may be adjusted as other therapies change or new conditions arise.
- **Repeat prescriptions:** Only given as clinically appropriate, after review.

Online product sales are a completely different experience — often, once you buy something, there's no follow-up or personalised support. Without this expert monitoring, you risk chasing symptoms blindly or missing out serious side effect warnings.

Considering the Real Costs: It's More Than Just the First Appointment

One mistake I often see is comparing just the first appointment cost or initial medicine price without considering the full picture.



Using clinics like Releaf as an example, they will show transparent pricing on their website — including consultation fees, medicine costs, and any follow-up visits. But bear in mind: cannabis-based treatments usually require multiple appointments over several months.

Here's what to ask and consider before committing to any cannabis medicine pathway:



1. What is the full cost of initial assessment, including any tests?
2. How often are follow-up appointments scheduled, and what do they cost?
3. What are the expected monthly medication expenses?
4. Are there additional charges for urgent or extra support?
5. Does the clinic offer any payment plans for ongoing treatment?

Thinking about total cost over 6 to 12 months provides a realistic budget outlook, rather than just looking at “day one” expenses — which may falsely appear affordable but pile up quickly without monitoring.

Summary: Why Prescribed Medicines Are a Safer, Smarter Choice

To wrap things up, here’s a quick checklist comparing prescribed cannabis medicines with online products:

- **Quality control:** Prescribed medicines are manufactured and tested under strict standards; online products are variable and often unverified.
- **Legal status:** Only prescribed cannabis medicines are legal for medical use in the UK; many online products sit in legal grey zones.
- **Assessment before use:** Specialists review your health history and tailor treatment accordingly vs. no assessment online.
- **Ongoing monitoring:** Prescribed treatments come with regular follow-up to adjust dosing and maximise safety; online buyers get none.
- **Cost transparency:** Good clinics offer clear information about all treatment costs over time, not just the first visit; online pricing is often misleading.

If you’re considering cannabis-based medicine, I highly recommend starting with specialist clinics like Releaf or checking official NHS guidance pages. Doing so protects your health, your wallet, and ensures your treatment journey has expert support from start to finish.

Useful Resources

- Releaf Clinic – Cannabis Medicine Specialists

- [NHS – Cannabis-Based Products for Medicinal Use](#)
- [Find a GP for referral to specialists](#)

Remember: Always discuss any treatment, prescribed or not, with your healthcare provider before making changes. Your medical history and expert advice remain your best safeguards.