

CLARITY GUIDES

In a world full of disinformation, get **Clarity**.

LAW · EVIDENCE · HISTORY · SCOTLAND

MEDICAL CANNABIS IN THE UK

The law, the evidence and the risks, with the Flexner Report
and the “healing web” inside your own body



Published by Clarity Guides · Cover: Franz Eugen Köhler, *Köhler's Medizinal-Pflanzen* (1887), *Cannabis sativa*. Public domain

Preview – full guide coming soon – goclarity.uk

ABOUT THIS GUIDE



Since November 2018, doctors in the UK have been allowed to prescribe cannabis-based medicines. Tens of thousands of people now get them, almost all privately. Yet many people are still unsure what is legal, what the evidence really shows, and what the risks are.

This guide sets out the facts in plain English. It explains what cannabis, THC and CBD are, how the law works in Scotland and the rest of the UK, how people get a prescription and what it costs, and what the research says, condition by condition. It covers side effects, driving, travel and the questions to ask a doctor.

It also has two deeper sections. The first is the history of the **Flexner Report** of 1910, which reshaped medical training in North America and is often linked with how herbal medicines, cannabis among them, fell out of mainstream medicine. The second is **the Healing Web**. We look at a popular 2019 map of that name, which lists cannabis among its remedies, and then at the real “healing web” inside every one of us: the **endocannabinoid system**, a network of receptors and signals that scientists only discovered in the 1990s.

Our labels. **RECORD** means something we can show from a law, an official document or a published study. **LEGEND** means a story or popular claim that cannot be checked. **MODERN** means a modern idea, product or theory. You will also find paired boxes headed **What people report** and **What the evidence says**, and a strength rating for the evidence on each condition.

Not medical advice. This guide is for general information and education only. It does not recommend any treatment, product, dose or clinic, and it is not a substitute for a doctor. Please speak to your GP or a specialist before using any cannabis-based product, especially if you take other medicines, are pregnant or breastfeeding, are under 25, or have a history of mental illness. Recreational cannabis remains illegal in the UK. Nothing here encourages illegal use.

IN THIS GUIDE



01	What cannabis, THC and CBD are	4
02	A plant with a long medical past	6
03	The Flexner Report of 1910	9
04	The Healing Web map	13
05	Your body's own healing web	16
06	How the endocannabinoid system works	17
07	What is proven, and what is not	20
08	UK law today	22
09	Getting access: NHS and private routes	25
10	The evidence, condition by condition	27
11	Side effects and risks	29
12	Driving	31
13	Carrying it, work and travel	32
14	Questions to ask a doctor	33
15	Myths and facts	35
	Safety first	29
	Useful contacts	37
	The Clarity Guides library	38
	Glossary	39
	Further reading	40
	Sources	41
	Image credits	42



THE BASICS

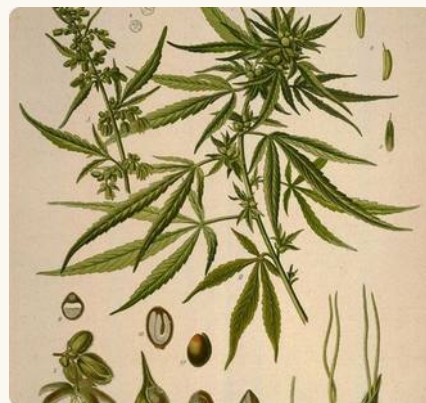
WHAT CANNABIS, THC AND CBD ARE

Cannabis is a plant, but “medical cannabis” can mean very different things: a licensed medicine made to strict standards, a prescribed dried flower, or a shop-bought CBD oil. Knowing which is which is the first step to clarity.

RECORD **Cannabis** (*Cannabis sativa*) is a flowering plant first grown in Asia thousands of years ago for fibre, seed, oil and medicine. The female flowers carry tiny resin glands that make more than 100 chemicals called **cannabinoids**, plus scented oils called **terpenes**.

RECORD Two cannabinoids matter most:

- **THC** (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) is the main chemical that causes the “high”. It can also ease nausea, stimulate appetite and change how pain is felt, and it carries most of the risks, such as anxiety, paranoia and psychosis.
- **CBD** (cannabidiol) does not cause a high. At high doses it is a licensed epilepsy medicine. At the low doses found in shop products, there is little good evidence that it does very much at all.



Cannabis sativa, from Köhler's *Medizinal-Pflanzen*, a German atlas of medicinal plants (1887). Public domain.

RECORD **Hemp** is the name for cannabis varieties grown for fibre and seed, with very little THC. In the UK, growing hemp needs a Home Office licence. Hemp seeds and hemp seed oil are ordinary foods and contain almost no cannabinoids.

✦ THREE VERY DIFFERENT THINGS

LICENSED MEDICINES

Products that have passed full clinical trials and have a UK licence: **Epidyolex** (purified CBD, for some rare epilepsies), **Sativex** (a THC and CBD mouth spray, for spasticity in MS) and **nabilone** (a man-made THC-like capsule, for sickness during chemotherapy).

UNLICENSED PRESCRIBED PRODUCTS

Dried flower for vaporising, oils and capsules made to medical standards but **not** tested in full trials for a licence. Most UK prescriptions are of this kind. The law calls them **cannabis-based products for medicinal use** (CBPMs).

SHOP CBD PRODUCTS

Oils, gummies and drinks sold as food supplements. They are not medicines, cannot claim to treat anything, and must contain no more than trace amounts of THC (chapter 8).

Sources: Home Office, “Drug licensing factsheet: cannabis, CBD and other cannabinoids” (updated 2024); NHS, “Medical cannabis (and cannabis oils)”; MHRA; NICE NG144 (2019).