

WELLFORD



From Stigma to Solution

Reframing the conversation to highlight
the societal benefits of Medical Cannabis.

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Abstract

UK adults remain confused about the legal status and availability of medical cannabis. While the awareness of cannabis to treat certain medical conditions – especially relating to anxiety and pain management – remains high, there are still doubts regarding its efficacy and side-effects.

Part of the problem is one of communication and the focus in the media and within Government on potential harms, rather than societal benefits. Removing a dependency on conventional treatments, and most notably opioids which are highly addictive and have a substantial risk of overdose and long-term health consequences, would foster a healthier society and demonstrate a commitment to compassionate and effective healthcare solutions.

Doctors have been taught for decades that cannabis is a dangerous recreational drug, the result is a reluctance to prescribe and while the UK Government has signalled its commitment to more evidence-based research, there is still no education and no NHS-funded trials.

The result is a vacuum, which does nothing to address the mistrust within the healthcare profession, and leaves medical cannabis inaccessible for thousands of patients.

A pilot in France, however, has shown exciting results in the use of cannabis to alleviate the side effects of chemotherapy, one of the conditions for which medical cannabis can currently be prescribed by the NHS in England alongside epilepsy and multiple sclerosis.

For real progress to be made, further evidence is key to convince the general public and healthcare professionals of its legality and effectiveness, and in convincing the Government of its justified role as a mainstream medical treatment.

UK Research

Wellford Medical Clinics – which legally prescribes medical cannabis for pain conditions, including chronic pain, arthritis, and neuropathic pain conditions – commissioned research to assess people's attitudes and perceptions of medical cannabis at time when it is frequently making the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

The research found that while almost four in every five (79%) of UK adults had heard of medical cannabis prior to taking the survey, 25% were not aware that it can be prescribed in the UK and a further 26% were not aware that it can also be prescribed privately. Nearly half (49%) believed it was only available via the NHS.

Awareness of medical cannabis was higher among older respondents aged 55+ (85%), particularly when compared to respondents under 35 (69%).

Awareness of its legal status was also highest among older respondents with 32% of over 55s correctly stating that it can be prescribed both privately and via the NHS, compared to only 20% of 18–34-year-olds.

Awareness of medical cannabis's legal status was equal among men and women, although women were slightly more likely to incorrectly believe that it cannot be legally prescribed (27% compared to 23% of men). Of those that were aware of its legal status, only 66% knew it has been legal to prescribe since 2018, 16% believed it was legalised before 2018, and 18% believed it was legalised last year.

Looking past legal status, awareness across UK adults is generally low. Only 40% knew it was subject to UK government regulations (33% for under 35s) and just 25% knew it receives limited NHS funding. Concerningly, nearly 1 in 10 (9%) incorrectly believe medical cannabis can be smoked with a prescription – rising to 12% for the 18–34 age group.



79% **Four in every five** of UK adults had heard of medical cannabis prior to taking the survey.

UK Research

STATEMENTS BELIEVED TO BE TRUE AMONG UK ADULTS

Medical cannabis is subject to UK government regulations	40%	CORRECT. Medical cannabis is regulated by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and falls under Schedule 2 of the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001
Medical cannabis is privately regulated and is not subject to UK government regulations	6%	INCORRECT. Medical cannabis is regulated by the UK government, including through MHRA and the Home Office
Medical cannabis is illegal and therefore not subject to any regulations	5%	INCORRECT. Medical cannabis was legalized in 2018 and is regulated
Medical cannabis currently receives limited NHS funding	25%	CORRECT: Only a very limited number of patients get NHS-funded medical cannabis. For most, access is private only
Medical cannabis currently receives no NHS funding	11%	INCORRECT: It receives very limited NHS funding
Medical cannabis currently receives routine NHS funding	8%	INCORRECT. It is not routinely funded on the NHS except in very rare, specific cases
Cannabis-based products can be eaten/taken orally with a prescription	22%	CORRECT: Oral cannabis-based medicines (e.g. oils, capsules) are legally available via prescription
Cannabis-based products can be vaped with a prescription	9%	CORRECT: Certain vaporised cannabis flower products are available by prescription in specialist clinics, though not widely through the NHS
Cannabis-based products can be smoked with a prescription	9%	INCORRECT. Smoking cannabis is not a prescribed method of administration in the UK due to health risks
Any registered healthcare professional can prescribe medical cannabis for certain conditions	10%	INCORRECT. Only specialist doctors (not GPs) listed on the General Medical Council Specialist Register can initiate a prescription
Medical cannabis can be purchased OTC (over-the-counter) without a prescription	5%	INCORRECT. Medical cannabis is prescription-only. CBD-only products can be bought OTC, but they are not considered medical cannabis

Opposition on the other hand, is highest among the 18–34 year olds, with 21% stating they are against its use compared to just 10% of 55+ year olds and 11% of 35–54 year olds. Ambivalence is the lowest among this age group too. Their responses were more likely to be opinionated – only 14% said they were unsure, compared to 18% of 35–54 year olds and 20% of 55+ year olds.

Nearly half of supporters of medical cannabis (48%) believe it can provide hope for people who have not responded to other therapies, rising to 57% for the oldest age group (55+). More than a third (39%) of advocates expressed support for the evidence-based research around the treatment and 35% believe it's time to re-evaluate societal attitudes to cannabis and recognise its therapeutic potential (35%).

Expressed concerns

Those who expressed opposition or uncertainty are mostly worried about the potential for addiction or abuse (32%). More than a fifth (22%) expressed concern about the impact on young people and a similar proportion (23%) expressed concern about the impact on vulnerable populations, the potential for increased recreational use, possible side effects, and sending the wrong message about drug use (23%).

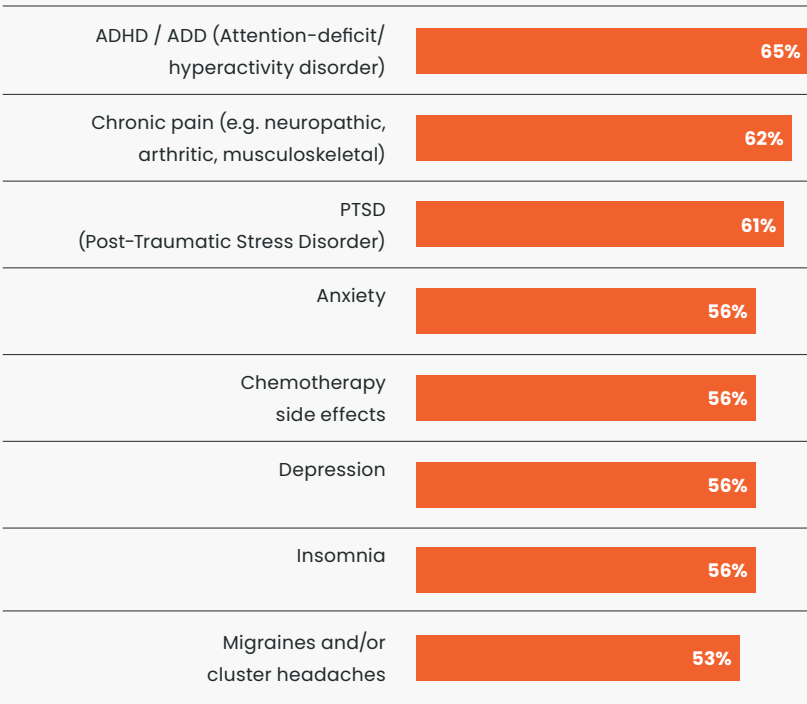
However, over a quarter (26%) admit they don't know enough about medical cannabis to form an opinion, suggesting more information needs to be easily accessible.

Despite high levels of support for its legality, not all UK adults with long-term conditions are open to trying medicinal cannabis.

Among the UK adults who consented to talk about their health, over half (54%) stated they have a long-term condition, with the most common being anxiety (20%), depression (15%), and chronic pain (14%). When asked whether they'd be likely to consider medicinal cannabis to help with the symptoms of their long-term conditions, reactions were mixed, as shown in the graph below:

OPENNESS TO MEDICINAL CANNABIS

UK adults likely to use medicinal cannabis for their condition



Expressed concerns (Cont.)

Over three in five people who suffer from ADHD (65%), chronic pain (62%), and PTSD (61%) say they would be likely to try cannabis. The research also indicates that more than half of those suffering from anxiety (56%), chemotherapy side effects (56%), depression (56%), and insomnia (56%) would consider a prescription for medical cannabis to manage these conditions or symptoms.

Among those unlikely to consider a medical cannabis prescription, the top reasons are doubts about its effectiveness (32%), lack of interest (27%), and concern about side effects (25%). Conversely, many of those open to medical cannabis face access barriers. A third (33%) are unsure how to obtain a prescription, 29% don't know if it's right for their condition and 26% say they cannot afford private treatment regardless.

TOP 10 BARRIERS TO ACCESSING A CANNABIS PRESCRIPTION

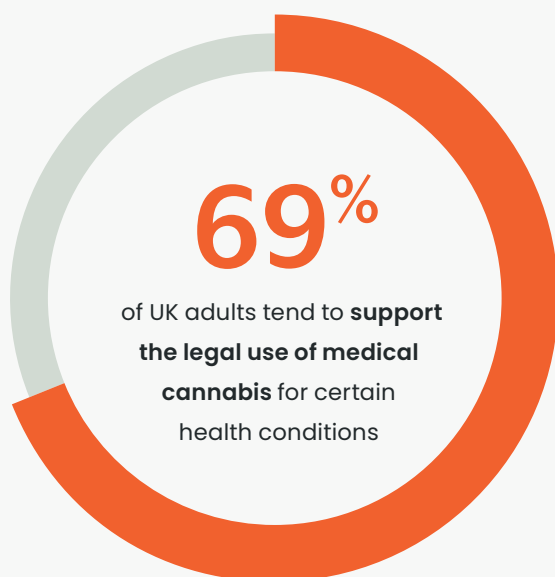
Base: 577 (all those likely to use medicinal cannabis for their condition)



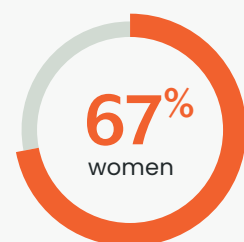
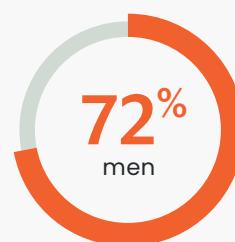


Low awareness; high support

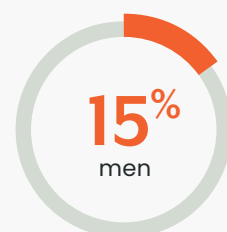
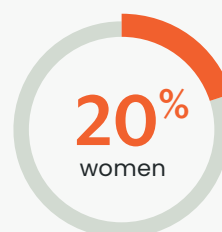
Though awareness is low, support is high – especially among older adults. The majority of UK adults (69%) tend to support the legal use of medical cannabis for certain health conditions. Support is higher among men than women (72% vs 67%) with women more likely to express uncertainty (20% vs 15%).



Support is higher among men than women



Women more likely to **express uncertainty**





Medical cannabis – facts:

LEGAL STATUS

Legal since November 2018 and a Schedule 2 controlled drug, meaning it can be prescribed in certain circumstances.

PRESCRIBING

Only specialist doctors on the General Medical Council (GMC) Specialist Register can prescribe it. GPs cannot initiate a prescription – they must refer the patient to a specialist.

NHS VERSUS PRIVATE ACCESS

NHS prescriptions are extremely limited and will only be considered for epilepsy, multiple sclerosis and the side effects of chemotherapy. Research from the Cannabis Industry Council revealed that annually about 1,000 patients receive NHS prescriptions. Most patients – about 20,000 – access medical cannabis via private clinics which are independently regulated¹.

CONSUMING AND DOSING

While medical cannabis is legal in the UK, smoking it remains illegal, regardless of whether it's prescribed. There are many ways to take medical cannabis: there are capsules, topical creams, oils which can be taken under-the-tongue, or dried flower for vaping.



The wider picture

The research was undertaken in a wider context of a global conversation regarding the social and medical acceptance of cannabis in the treatment of certain conditions, and in particular pain management and anxiety.

A 2023 survey in Ireland, for example, found that 85% admitted to smoking cannabis to self-medicate without a prescription, primarily for anxiety, followed by depression and pain. Additionally, 96% of participants expressed a willingness to consider it as a treatment optionⁱⁱ.

This trend is also evident in the UK, where an estimated 1.8 million people used illegal cannabis in 2022 due to limited awareness of legal optionsⁱⁱⁱ, an issue also borne out by the Wellford research.

Legalizing and advocating medical cannabis on a broader scale could help divert funds away from the black market, boosting the legal economy, reducing prosecution and imprisonment for cannabis use, and mitigating health risks associated with contaminated products. Black market cannabis often contains heavy metals (specifically lead and cadmium), pesticides, and microbials, posing significant health hazards^{iv}.

85% Admitted to smoking cannabis to **self-medicate without a prescription**





Reliance on opioids

The current standard of care for severe pain management in the UK predominantly relies on opioids, which, despite their effectiveness, come with major risks.

Opioids are highly addictive, with a substantial risk of overdose and long-term health consequences including, but not limited to, increased cardiovascular risks, endocrine abnormalities, and respiratory depression^v. The over-prescription of opioids in certain parts of the world, including the US, has led to what is now dubbed 'the opioid epidemic', which in turn is leading to an alarming increase in overdoses^{vi}.

In clinical studies, cannabis has shown promising results in managing chronic pain and anxiety while assisting with opioid withdrawal syndrome^{vii}. Several studies highlight its efficacy in reducing pain severity and improving quality of life over extended periods^{viii}.

Patients using medical cannabis report fewer severe side effects and a lower risk of addiction compared to 'traditional' opioids. Overall, existing research suggests that cannabis can significantly enhance patients' quality of life by providing effective pain and anxiety relief with fewer adverse effects than the current 'conventional' medical treatments.





The French Experience

A French pilot study on medical cannabis extracts (oral forms, not inhaled), encompassing more than 2,500 patients, marks a significant advancement in the medical application of cannabis oil formulations, particularly for conditions unresponsive to standard treatments. A substantial portion of the participants (54%) suffered from neuropathic pain refractory to conventional therapies.

The study revealed remarkable outcomes, especially in pain management, with 79% of patients initially describing their pain as severe or unbearable, which decreased to just 29% after three to twelve months of consistent treatment. This profound and sustained reduction in pain severity underscores the potential of medical cannabis in pain management.

Beyond pain relief, the French study also explored the effects of medical cannabis on other health conditions. For oncology patients, cannabis

treatment alleviated symptoms associated with cancer and the side effects of cancer therapies, such as severe nausea and sleep disturbances. Additionally, in cases of drug-resistant epilepsy, a significant reduction in the frequency of seizures was observed. The study utilized a range of cannabis products, including orally administered oils and vaporized flowering tops, tailored to different THC/CBD ratios, allowing for an effective balance between therapeutic benefits and minimizing adverse effects.

This is especially interesting in the context of the conditions for which medical cannabis can currently be prescribed by the NHS in England: epilepsy, multiple sclerosis and the side effects of chemotherapy. It is also interesting given that few patients with these conditions in the UK are currently able to get the help they require from the State.



Societal and Economic Impact

The societal costs of opioid and benzodiazepine use are substantial. Opioids, due to their high potential for addiction and overdose, impose a heavy burden on healthcare systems and law enforcement. Data has shown that the dependency and cognitive decline associated with benzodiazepines increase the risk of accidents and further strain public health resources^{ix}.

In contrast, cannabis offers a safer alternative with a lower risk profile^x. The long-term benefits include reduced healthcare costs due to fewer side effects and lower addiction rates. In addition to its clinical benefits, the broader societal impacts of medical cannabis are noteworthy.

A study linked the introduction of dedicated medical cannabis dispensaries with a 19% reduction in crime rates, suggesting additional public safety benefits^{xi}. Additionally, a review examining the impact of legalising medicinal cannabis on opioid analgesic overdose rates found a significant association with reduced mortality from such overdoses^{xii}.



So what are we advocating?

The broader legalisation of medicinal cannabis and enhanced transparency could significantly reduce costs associated with arresting, prosecuting and jailing individuals for cannabis offences in the UK.

Channelling funds into legal cannabis markets would not only save resources but also improve public health and safety. Regulated cannabis products eliminate the risks of toxic contaminants found in black market sources and will provide healthier form of administration via orally consumed extracts.

Moreover, providing access to safer alternatives for pain and anxiety management, such as cannabis, would help avoid the severe risks associated with opioids and benzodiazepines. This policy shift would foster a healthier society and demonstrate a commitment to compassionate and effective healthcare solutions.

To achieve progress, however, requires much greater discussion and consensus among those in the industry. The prevailing lack of understanding, and the uncertainty or opposition amongst UK adults is a symptom of a fragmented industry.

The industry needs to come together and work collectively to:

- Increase awareness and understanding of its use – only 26% of UK population knows that medical cannabis can currently be prescribed by private AND NHS healthcare professionals for certain health conditions

- Tackle the reputational risk associated with street cannabis by shifting the conversation and better promoting the potential benefits rather the potential harms
- Address the media agenda which is easily swayed to discredit and scaremonger by its use of selective ‘expert’ advice.

In addition, the industry needs to more actively lobby the UK Government to help fund more evidence-based research (which was promised in 2019 by the Conservative government, and which was reaffirmed by the Labour government in October 2024).

The National Institute for Health and Care Research & NHS England recently confirmed more than £8.5 million in funding for clinical trials to investigate whether cannabis-based medicines are effective in the treatment of drug-related epilepsies. Since 2018, however, some 28 studies have been approved by the MHRA to look at cannabis-based medicines but not yet concluded, making progress glacially slow.

Without improved evidence, prescribers remain hesitant, and NHS cannot make informed decisions, and long-held prohibitionist stance will continue to shape public perception.

About Wellford

Wellford legally prescribes medical cannabis for pain conditions, including chronic pain, arthritis, and neuropathic pain conditions. The company was started with the express intent to deliver on the mission to make the best quality medical-grade cannabis accessible to all.

As part of its range, Wellford offers a cannabis oil extract line as well as four distinct medical cannabis flower ranges, each showcasing a unique cultivation method to deliver a specific medical cannabis experience: Aqua (aquaponic and organic), Aero (aeroponic), Luma (greenhouse), and Peak (indoor). This allows patients to choose the product type and growing method that best meets their needs.

Methodology

The Opinium UK Consumer Omnibus is an online survey of 2,000 UK adults aged 18 and over. Results are weighted to be nationally representative by age, gender, working status, socio-economic group (SEG), and region, where relevant. Opinium is an award winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on pulse of what people **think, feel** and **do**. Research was carried out by Opinium on behalf of Wellford Medical Clinics in February 2025.

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