NHS
National Patient Safety Agency

Patient briefing

21

Alert

28 March 2007

UNDERSTANDING NPSA ADVICE

The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) helps healthcare organisations to provide safer healthcare for everyone. This information is about the advice the NPSA has given the NHS on making sure epidural medicine is administered safely.

Ensuring safer practice with epidural injections and infusions

An epidural is a type of anaesthetic you may be given if you are having surgery on your lower body. It will stop you from feeling any pain but does not make you unconscious. It is often used for pain relief during childbirth.

Epidurals are regularly performed in hospitals and are a safe way of controlling pain.

Epidural medicines must be injected into the spine, rather than into a vein in the arm as with general anaesthetics. There have been a very small number of reports of patients being harmed through epidural medicines mistakenly being injected into a patient's arm. Three patients are reported to have died between 1 January 2005 and 31 May 2006 because of this.

The National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) has also received reports of the wrong drug or dose of epidural medicine being given to patients. The majority of these incidents did not result in any harm to the patients involved.

The NPSA has issued advice to healthcare organisations on how to ensure epidurals are given safely. This advice includes guidance on how staff should store, label and administer epidural medicines.

About the NPSA

The NPSA promotes safer healthcare by collecting and analysing information about patient safety from staff and patients, and through working with healthcare organisations to promote an open and fair culture.

If you would like more information about the NPSA's work, visit our website at: **www.npsa.nhs.uk**