# Norfolk man’s rare stroke linked to E. coli from supermarket sandwich prompts food safety warnings



Blake Pennell, a 30-year-old 3D artist from Loddon, Norfolk, has found himself at the centre of a terrifying health crisis following what his family believes was food poisoning from a £3 supermarket chicken sandwich. After contracting E. coli and suffering a stroke, Blake was left in a coma for nearly a year, with doctors initially fearing he could be brain dead.

It all began on June 14, 2023, when Blake began to feel unwell, experiencing symptoms that he initially dismissed. His condition deteriorated rapidly, and just a week later, he collapsed while vomiting in the bathroom. His partner, Lauren Hale, shared that despite his speech and movements seeming normal at first, subtle signs of his deteriorating condition emerged. “None of the ‘FAST’ symptoms were there,” she explained. FAST is an acronym used to identify the main indicators of a stroke — drooping face, arm weakness, and speech difficulties.

Rushed to Royal Stoke Hospital, Blake's treatment initially did not include stroke identification. However, only after an hour of admission, when his speech began to slur, medical staff escalated their response and performed a scan. The diagnosis was a rare basilar artery stroke, where a blockage in the artery that supplies blood to the brain leads to potentially severe damage.

This was not an isolated incident; during May and June of 2024, the UK experienced a widespread E. coli outbreak that left over 275 individuals hospitalised. Reports linked the outbreak specifically to pre-packed sandwiches containing lettuce, which prompted supermarket chains such as Aldi, Asda, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons, and others to issue product recalls. A national health initiative led by the UK Health Security Agency revealed that lettuce was the likely source of contaminated food items, resulting in two deaths and various legal actions against several retailers by affected customers.

In Blake's case, after his stroke and subsequent surgeries, including a posterior craniotomy to address cerebral tonsil herniation, his condition stabilised. While he spent weeks in a medical coma reliant on ventilators, family support played a crucial role in his recovery. Lauren recounted moments that filled her with hope, stating, “I began to notice small things… Blake wiggled his eyebrows at me,” which proved he was still engaged in some way with his surroundings.

As his therapy progressed, Blake demonstrated incremental improvements, regaining some control over his right limb and developing communication skills through a tablet. While he cannot yet sit unassisted or stand, minimal brain damage has been assessed, allowing for a positive outlook on his rehabilitation journey.

The E. coli outbreak serves as a stark reminder of the potential dangers posed by ready-to-eat meals. Health experts have noted that even seemingly benign food items like sandwiches can harbour bacteria if not handled properly. Many families, including that of an 11-year-old girl who became severely ill after consuming such a sandwich, have raised concerns about safety protocols in the food supply chain.

This situation underscores the vital importance of food safety in preventing similar health crises in the future. As Blake and Lauren navigate the challenging terrain of recovery, they highlight the need for increased awareness about the symptoms of strokes, emphasising that these episodes are not confined to the elderly. Their experience might just catalyse a change in how such symptoms are recognised and treated, potentially saving lives in the process.

### Reference Map

1. Parag. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
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Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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* <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/epidemiology-and-infection/article/national-outbreak-of-shiga-toxinproducing-escherichia-coli-o145h28-associated-with-prepacked-sandwiches-united-kingdom-mayjune-2024/213A0B1E2D14A8C634767047CC636D2F> - A study published in Epidemiology & Infection journal details a national outbreak of Shiga toxin-producing E. coli O145:H28 in the UK between May and June 2024. The outbreak was linked to pre-packed sandwiches containing lettuce, with 288 confirmed cases, predominantly adults, and two deaths. The implicated sandwich producers voluntarily recalled ready-to-eat products on June 14, 2024. ([cambridge.org](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/epidemiology-and-infection/article/national-outbreak-of-shiga-toxinproducing-escherichia-coli-o145h28-associated-with-prepacked-sandwiches-united-kingdom-mayjune-2024/213A0B1E2D14A8C634767047CC636D2F?utm_source=openai))
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