



# Ananda Lewis chose 'natural' cancer care over conventional treatment. Many others do too -- and it's risky

Alternative therapies for cancer care can have dire consequences, experts say.

By [Dr. Lemuel Hackshaw](#)

June 15, 2025, 6:04 AM

Ananda Lewis, former MTV VJ and TV host, died last week from breast cancer at age 52.

After [revealing in 2020 that she had been battling breast cancer](#) for more than two years, Lewis announced she was foregoing conventional treatment in favor of holistic methods such as juicing, herbal remedies and detox regimens.

Lewis' cancer had already reached an advanced stage by the time it was detected -- delayed in part by her long-standing fear of mammograms and concerns about radiation exposure.

**MORE: Former MTV VJ and talk show host Ananda Lewis dies at 52**

Like Lewis, some cancer patients are questioning traditional cancer care and turning to alternative therapies instead. Famously, Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Inc., [delayed surgery after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer](#) in favor of vegan diet, cleanses and herbal remedies.

Fewer than one percent of cancer patients refuse all treatment, according to a [May 2022 study](#). However, [another study](#) found that upwards of 19% decline at least some of the recommended treatment, including chemotherapy and radiation.

Patients with breast or colorectal cancer who chose alternative treatments were nearly five times more likely to die, and those with non-metastatic lung cancer had more than double the risk, according to a [2017 study from Yale School of Medicine](#).

"What's at stake here is life and death. We know that particularly early detection saves lives," Dr. Elizabeth Comen, a breast oncologist at NYU Langone Hospital, told ABC News.

Comen said doctors need to explore why some patients distrust the system even though modern medicine has greatly improved cancer outcomes.

Many patients who decline conventional treatments do so due to fear of side effects, distrust of the medical system or a desire for control, Comen said. They often choose natural remedies believing these are safer or better for their health.

**MORE: Women diagnosed with breast cancer in their 20s, 30s, 40s describe being robbed of their femininity**

It may be an enticing idea that the body can just heal itself, Comen conceded.

The wellness industry and social media often glamorize "natural healing," pushing unproven treatments as safer than standard care, according to Comen.

In the face of a scary diagnosis and growing mistrust, some patients see alternative therapies as more hopeful, she said.

"I've seen patients mortgage their home, drain their entire finances for presumably magic bullets that they've seen online." Comen said.

Complementary care can be helpful, but only when combined with standard treatment, Comen cautioned.

Practices like acupuncture, mindfulness meditation and yoga can help reduce treatment-related side effects such as pain, fatigue and anxiety, Comen said. She added there is robust evidence that diet and exercise can improve outcomes. [A 2022 study](#) found physical activity -- in addition to rather than in lieu of treatment -- decreases the severity of side effects of cancer treatment, reduces fatigue, has a positive impact on mental health and improves quality of life.

Comen emphasized that early, evidence-based treatment is crucial to improve the odds of survival, especially for aggressive cancers. Returning to conventional care after trying alternative methods risks progression of the disease past the point where doctors can contain it, she added.

"I have countless heart-breaking stories of patients not trusting a medical system, being sold a false bill of goods by someone that is not medically trained, and they often come back when they have been abandoned," she said. "They come back to me when honestly it is too late to be able to provide curative intent. Those stories haunt me."

*Dr. Lemuel Hackshaw, MD, is an emergency medicine chief resident at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and a member of the ABC News Medical Unit.*

