

**T**HREE years ago, Alison Kelly made a decision that could have killed her. After being diagnosed with advanced breast cancer at 45, she followed her doctor's orders unquestioningly and began a gruelling course of chemotherapy. She was told she needed a course of radiotherapy — and five whole years of hormone therapy. But after just one session of chemo, Alison couldn't take any more.

So harrowing and so debilitating were the side effects that the mother-of-two from Drogheda took the brave — some might say reckless — decision to walk away from the treatment.

'It was sheer bloody hell,' says Alison, now 48. 'I suffered a neutropenic reaction to the chemicals injected into me, which meant that they wiped out my white blood cells. I suffered nausea, weakness, depression — at times I was suicidal — and I knew I could not put my body through that again.'

'One day, about six weeks after the chemo session, I wrote to my consultant telling him why I was stopping treatment. He wrote back saying that I must return for another dose. But my mind was made up.'

'Not one person, not even my mother or my two children, tried to talk me out of it,' adds Alison. 'I think they knew that if anything was going to kill me, it would be the next session of chemo, not the cancer. It was worth the risk.'

Today, it seems Alison's massive risk has paid off. Although she has never had medical confirmation that she is cured, the qualified psychotherapist says she has never felt healthier.

She walks, cycles and has more energy than she did in her 20s. It's hard to imagine that barely two years ago she was at death's door.

Her nightmare began in early 2003 when she discovered a small lump in her left breast. She visited her GP, who referred her to a breast clinic — but she was told it was fibrocystic tissue and nothing to worry about.

At the time, Alison also had an ultrasound scan, but it showed up clear. However she has since learned that early-stage breast cancer doesn't show up on ultrasounds; only mammograms can show up the early signs, micro-calcifications.

Despite her negative test results, however, Alison felt very unwell over the next two years.

'I was exhausted all the time,' she says. 'I just felt really unpleasant. I was catching bugs and colds, so I went back to my doctor. But a blood test and a liver test were clear. The doctor even said the tiredness I was feeling was probably psychosomatic.'

**B**UT my gut instinct told me something was very wrong. I asked for another referral to the breast clinic and this time I saw a senior consultant. I knew straight away that he thought it was serious.

'He did lots of tests, a mammogram, an ultrasound and a fine-needle aspiration, and finally, in February 2005, I was diagnosed with breast cancer.'

'I can truly say that my only feeling was one of huge relief,' says Alison. 'At least if we knew what it was, it could be treated.'

Alison, who is divorced and has two children, Ben, 21, and Zara, 16, had advanced breast cancer — only one stage from being terminal. She underwent a mastectomy and had 12 lymph nodes removed.

Afterwards, she was told she'd need six months of chemotherapy, six weeks of radiotherapy and five years of hormone therapy.

'I was resigned to the fact that I'd have to undergo that kind of treatment,' says Alison. 'But what frustrates me now is that many patients simply accept that chemo is the right treatment for them. They are not told about the side effects and so they are unable to make an informed choice.'

'I had a terrible time after just

# Alison believes she's beating cancer with T'ai chi. No way, say medics. So who's right?

Feeling good: Alison Kelly couldn't cope with the side effects of chemotherapy so she decided to change her diet and lifestyle

By JILL FOSTER

one session. The drugs I was given were Doxorubicin, Hydrochloride and Endoxana, but I believe it was the steroid Dexamethasone — which is mixed into the chemicals — which caused a psychotic reaction in me.

'I suffered headaches, weakness and I had nightmarish hallucinations. One minute I'd be hyperactive, the next deeply depressed. At one point I felt suicidal. I was trapped in this utterly dark place for weeks at a time.'

'I lost half a stone and was very scared of dying. My children felt so helpless. I remember Ben, who was 18 at the time, asking me "What can I do to help you?" and all I could say back to him was "Concentrate on your studies".'

'I've since learned that some people have actually died from chemo for advanced cancer,' Alison continues. 'I'm not surprised. Later, when I asked the oncology nurse why I hadn't been told about such reactions, her response amazed me. She said that if they ever told people about the side effects, patients wouldn't go through with it.'

When Alison began her own research into cancer treatments, the results surprised her.

In one Australian study, for instance, the effectiveness of chemo for certain types of cancer came out at just two per cent. And when she examined the side effects of radiotherapy — which include heart damage and osteoporosis — her mind was made up.

'I told my consultant I wouldn't be back for treatment and I've not seen him since,' she says. 'I've not been to my GP, either.'

Instead, Alison began trawling the internet for complementary medicines. But, with thousands of quack 'cures' to choose from, her work was cut out.

'There's a lot of alternative-

medicine rubbish out there,' she says. 'Once I began to dig deeper, though, I found quite a few treatments with scientific research published about them.'

**O**NE said that the best way to combat any disease is to cut out junk food and processed food. So I began eating a macrobiotic diet. It's basically a vegan diet: no meat, fish or dairy, but lots of organic vegetables, brown rice, pulses and nuts.

'I started taking lots of supplements and minerals as well, including the herbal medicine Essiac, which is made up of four different herbs. Although there's no scientific research, there's a lot of anecdotal evidence — especially from cancer patients in America — that it might help.'

As well as diet, Alison also began looking at her lifestyle.

'I took up T'ai chi, which I do every day, and that helped strengthen my body and was a great stress-reliever,' she says. 'I'm a Buddhist, so I'd set time aside every day to meditate. I began to think of the cancer, not

as a dreadful thing attacking my body, but as an imbalance.'

'I'd imagine vivid blue light flooding into my chest and my body, and making me well.'

'I used hypnotherapy on my patients, and so I decided to self-hypnotise. I'd think about myself in the future and would always see myself as healthy.'

Alison fully accepts that her methods will be greeted with scepticism by the medical profession and that doctors will urge others not to follow her lead.

Dr John Kennedy, consultant oncologist at St James's Hospital, Dublin, says: 'If a patient who goes off and has ground-coffee enemas, ground-up peach pits and God knows what else, there's no evidence whatsoever that if the patient is fine, those treatments have done anything. This is the kind of thing the alternative-medicine industry thrives on.'

Naomi Fitzgibbons, manager at Action Breast Cancer, which is under the remit of the Irish Cancer Society, also strongly recommends the conventional-medicine approach to fighting cancer.

It's extremely rare for a patient to die during chemotherapy, she adds, but she acknowledges that some people do have a very severe reaction to it.

'It can really affect the patient's quality of life,' she adds. 'If this lady decided she couldn't tolerate it, that's absolutely her right.'

However the Action Breast Cancer manager takes issue with some of Alison's findings. 'Chemotherapy is such a complex treatment that you simply can't say it has a two per cent success rate. There are thousands of pieces of research which would say differently.'

'And it's the best we have at the moment. It's not an exact science, unfortunately. But the trials are always trying to address the side effects. Chemotherapy beats cancer, that's scientifically proven,' concludes Mrs Fitzgibbons.

Alison, who says she has never felt healthier, remains defiant. 'Not enough people have taken the natural path for there to be any scientific research to say whether or not it works. I put my faith in the conventional treatment and it didn't work.'

Now she is writing a book about her experiences, and last year asked the Health Service Executive (HSE) to investigate if she was incorrectly given the all-clear at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, when she first went there with her breast lump.

The HSE initially refused to admit responsibility for her misdiagnosis, but after an external review of her case apologised for the fact that she was not given a mammogram at that time.

An internal review was also carried out on her negative experience with chemo and she is now waiting for the results of an external review on the same issue.

'I feel disgusted with the HSE,' says Alison. 'They did an internal investigation, but how am I supposed to trust that? The report didn't even mention the adverse reaction to the steroid. Quite a few people have written to me saying they have had similar experiences and I'm going to continue to speak out.'

## WHAT'S YOUR LIMIT

### Tomato Ketchup

IT MAY taste great, but ketchup is loaded with sugar — one tablespoon contains one teaspoon of sugar. However, cooked tomatoes are a good source of lycopene, an antioxidant credited with staving off cancer. But ketchup should be seen as a treat — so stick to no more than a small squirt a day. If you do smother it on your food, Dr Beckie Lang, a leading nutritionist, says opt for a version with reduced sugar.

