

# Nankinga survived cancer after being given six months to live

The back and forth visits to health facilities did not seem to help much as Nankinga's abdomen started swelling again early 2015.

**The second surgery**

A scan later showed that Nankinga had tumors attached to some vital body organs as well as inside her uterus. These (tumors) in the long run were affecting the normal functioning of her body.

"I was advised to have my uterus removed as one of the ways of saving my life, an idea I strongly opposed. There is no woman on earth who can easily agree to something like this. This is a uterus we are talking about, a vital organ in a woman's reproductive system, instrumental in childbearing. You do not just accept to have it removed," she says.

The suggestion was made by one of the doctors who was keenly monitoring

**MAKING IT.** In 2015, Alice Nankinga, 22, was horrified to learn that she had ovarian cancer, a disease that later cost her uterus. She opens up to **ESTHER OLUKA** on the trials and coping.

**A**lice Nankinga first noticed a small tiny swelling, the size of a pea on the left side of her umbilical cord in 2014. She did not see the need to seek urgent medical intervention since it did not hurt.

However, within the next few weeks, her lower abdomen started hardening like a stone.

"My stomach hurt every time I ate. It felt like I was straining it," she says.

The pain eventually forced Nankinga to stop eating food and in the process, she lost much weight. Meanwhile, the swelling continued growing bigger.

"The abnormal size of my belly got people saying that I was pregnant," she recalls.

Nankinga's mother, Ruth Kironde, got concerned and opted to take her daughter to seek the services of a herbalist.

"He (the herbalist) gave me a concoction to drink with assurance that I would recover faster," she says. Instead, the situation worsened as Nankinga's belly grew bigger. At the time, she was in her Senior Six vacation.

In July 2014, she chose to stop taking the mixture and sought medical assistance. She visited Friends Polyclinic in Kampala. An ultra sound scan conducted at the facility showed that Nankinga had an ovarian cyst.

She was then referred to a gynaecologist at Cedar Woods Medical Services, a health facility in Kamwokya, a city suburb. While there, she was told cysts were common among women and all she needed was surgery in order to get rid of them.

**The first surgery**

Nankinga went to Kibuli Hospital in Kampala, and had a surgical procedure performed at about Sh58m.

"My health improved after the cyst was removed and my belly flattened," she says.

In August, 2014, Nankinga enrolled for a Bachelors degree in Business Administration (BBA) at Makerere University Business School (MUBS). She commuted from home to school.

In September 2014, she got disturbed after noticing her abdomen swelling again. A scan later showed that it was some fluid causing the enlargement.

"The fluid was later drained using a thin tube that was connected to my abdomen," she says. The water resurfaced in November 2014 and again, it was drained at Friends Polyclinic.

"The fluid was tested and the doctor found nothing wrong with it," she says.

**“It tortures me psychologically that I will never be able to have my own children. I get hurt mostly after seeing a pregnant woman. It always hits me that I will never enjoy a similar experience.”**

**ALICE NANKINGA**

her condition.

"The doctor re-echoed that if I refused to have the surgery, I would risk my life."

Left with no choice, Nankinga opted for the surgery on February 12, 2015 at Kibuli Hospital, which involved removing both her uterus and spleen.

"It was the most difficult decision I have ever made in my life. I used to cry a lot and only found comfort in knowing that it was a necessary procedure needed to save my life," she says.

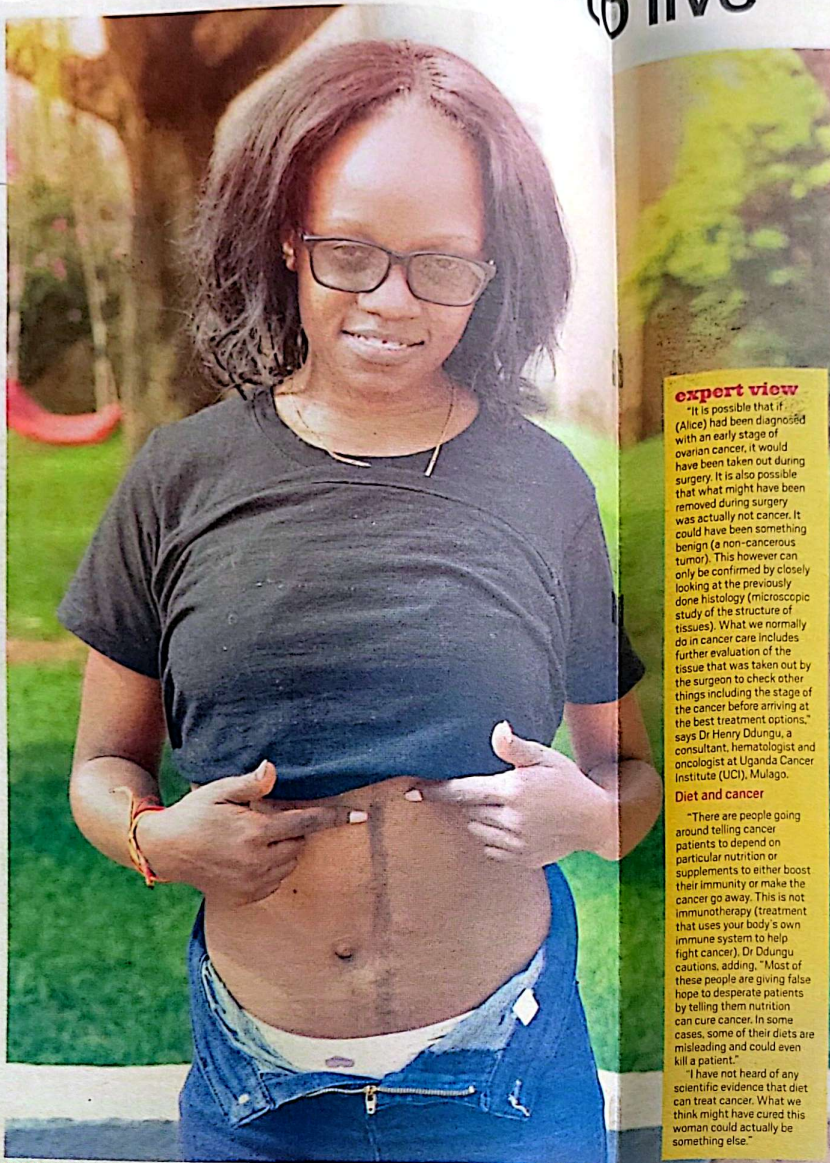
A spleen is an organ positioned under one's ribcage on the upper left side of the abdomen. It helps fight infection as well as sieve unwanted material, for instance, damaged blood cells.

Over six tumors were also removed during the surgery and these were examined and the results later showed Nankinga had ovarian cancer.

**Chemotherapy**

Immediately she was referred to the Uganda Cancer Institute at Mulago hospital where she was recommended to undertake six cycles of chemotherapy. This treatment involves a combination of medications to treat cancer. She underwent treatment from March to June 2015.

As Nankinga went about her treatment, she faced a cocktail of other health complications, including difficulty to pass urine and sitting. Meanwhile she was not also responding well to the chemotherapy to the extent that other tumors started developing and getting attached to vital organs such as the liver, kidney and the stomach walls.



**VICTOR:** Alice Nankinga shows the scar from the operation to remove her uterus after the effects of ovarian cancer. **PHOTOS BY ESTHER OLUKA**

**expert view**

It is possible that if (Alice) had been diagnosed with an early stage of ovarian cancer, it would have been taken out during surgery. It is also possible that what might have been removed during surgery was actually not cancer. It could have been something benign (a non-cancerous tumor). This however can only be confirmed by closely looking at the previously done histology (microscopic study of the structure of tissues). What we normally do in cancer care includes further evaluation of the tissue that was taken out by the surgeon to check other things including the stage of the cancer before arriving at the best treatment options," says Dr Henry Ddungu, a consultant, hematologist and oncologist at Uganda Cancer Institute (UCI), Mulago.

**Diet and cancer**

"There are people going around telling cancer patients to depend on particular nutrition or supplements to either boost their immunity or make the cancer go away. This is not immunotherapy (treatment that uses your body's own immune system to help fight cancer). Dr Ddungu cautions, adding, "Most of these people are giving false hope to desperate patients by telling them nutrition can cure cancer. In some cases, some of their diets are misleading and could even kill a patient."

"I have not heard of any scientific evidence that diet can treat cancer. What we think might have cured this woman could actually be something else."



**Hospitalised:** Nankinga would use a catheter to pass urine.

**Third surgery**

Nankinga underwent another operation in February 2016 to have some of these tumors removed before being advised to also undergo radiotherapy which involves the use of high-energy rays aimed at destroying cancer cells on a particular part of the body.

Getting the treatment was impossible at the time because the radiotherapy machine had broken down at the Uganda Cancer Institute.

"I was in pain and the options were narrowing. This was when reality struck me that I was going to die," she says.

As she wondered where her life was headed next, an idea suddenly struck her of going to Nairobi to seek further treatment after learning of Cancer Care Kenya, a facility dedicated to cancer diagnosis and treatment. Her family members and friends were caring and supportive enough to organise a fundraising campaign aimed at getting the necessary money for treatment. They raised about Sh35 million.

**The death sentence**

Nankinga eventually travelled together with her elder sister, Idah Siuuna, to Kenya. While at Cancer Care Kenya, a number of tests were conducted and results showed a week later, in July 2016 she had cancer.

"I recall the doctor telling me, Alice I am very sorry, there is nothing I can do," she says, adding, "That the cancer was dormant and was not sure of when it would re-activate."

He prescribed medicine for Nankinga. She did not, however, buy it because she saw no point in taking it. Besides, the doctor revealed that she only had six months to live.

**A call that changed her life**

Just when Nankinga had lost all hope, a Ugandan researcher based in Canada called her on phone in August 2016 offering assistance.

"That he had heard about my predicament and therefore wanted to help me get better," she says.

This researcher advised her to go on a strict diet for 30 days.

"For this period of time, he told me to take juice blended from fruits such as apples, grapes, mangoes, pears, peaches and beetroot, among others," she says, adding, "Also, he advised me not to eat anything during this period except for salads or green vegetables such as spinach or lettuce. He gave me the option of blending these as well making green juice."

**Two cents**

For women going through any health ordeal, Nankinga advises them to open up to loved ones about their experiences.

"It is bad to keep quiet. It is like dying alone. Talk to people especially those who understand what you are going through. They will uplift you through words of hope and encouragement," she says.

"Cancer is not the end of the world, one can beat it and come out alive," Nankinga concludes.

**2018**

**IN MARCH, ALICE NANKINGA WAS DECLARED CANCER-FREE AT EBENEZER LTD CLINICAL LABORATORY (ECL), KAMPALA.**



**Memory lane:** Nankinga before and during treatment in 2016.



Also, she was advised to take particular supplements as well as include sodium bicarbonate in her diet, which researchers claim to have a number of health benefits, including neutralising acid in the stomach. Nankinga used part of the remaining fundraised money to invest into the diet.

By December 2016, Nankinga began to improve as the pain and abdominal swellings had subsided. Also, she gained a little bit of weight.

And in June 2017, Nankinga took a bold step in testing for ovarian cancer at Ebenezer Ltd Clinical Laboratory (ECL) in Kampala.

The results were disappointing as they showed that she still had the disease.

I could not understand why the cancer was still there, yet, I had begun to feel much better. This whole thing baffled me," she says.

At the time, Nankinga still had a scar healing from a previous operation.

"The researcher reasoned that sometimes when a patient has an inflammation from a scar, the results do not always come back as expected," she says.

Nankinga was advised by the researcher to mix black seed oil with ginger and apply onto the scar to reduce soreness. Then, she went back and repeated the test after a few months.

old repeated the test. "The results came back negative, a revelation that both shocked and excited me," she says.

The researcher whom Nankinga now terms as a 'guardian angel' has advised her to hold the excitement as cancers have tendencies of re-occurring. He instructed Nankinga to continue testing from time to time.

The researcher declined *Sunday Monitor's* request for an interview.

**What life is like today**

Nankinga is now more vigilant about her lifestyle. She is into plant-based diets, such as vegetables. Also, she does not take dairy products such as milk, yoghurt and ice cream.

When Nankinga's uterus was removed during the life saving surgery, "It tortures me psychologically that I will never be able to have my own children. I get hurt mostly after seeing a pregnant woman. It always hits me that I will never enjoy a similar experience," she says.

Sometimes she diverts such thoughts by either watching a film or going out with friends.

School also keeps her preoccupied. After taking a break due to the intense treatment, Nankinga resumed school on January 30, 2018. She is pursuing a Bachelor of Business Administration.