A team of national senior service and health organizations hopes people will notice certain signs their older parents might be developing cognitive difficulties this holiday season and use them to start a conversation about things seniors can do to keep their minds sharp.

Through Jan. 1, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are teaching people about how eating well, getting exercise and checking in with a doctor or pharmacist can go a long way when it comes to preventing the memory, decision-making and concentration problems that come with age.

“(The holidays are) a time when families come together,” said Sandy Markwood, CEO of the NAAAA. “It’s also a time to assess how Mom and Dad are doing and come up with a plan to help them stay engaged and active.”

A recent report from the U.S. Census Bureau found about 30 percent of the country’s seniors reported having some type of cognitive difficulty between 2008 and 2012. Cognitive difficulty was the fourth-most common type of disability among seniors after problems moving around or climbing stairs, hearing problems and any type of physical, mental or emotional problem that makes it difficult to run errands and live independently.

Markwood said cognitive problems could be the result of a senior’s normal aging process, a vitamin deficiency, depression, dehydration or the side effect of medication or a combination of medications he or she is taking to treat an unrelated health condition. But they could also signal a more serious health condition, including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia, she said, which is why it’s important for people to check in with their doctors as soon as symptoms show up.

No matter what a person’s situation, though Markwood said, “There really are some practical things people can do to improve their brain health,” which include eating well, staying physically active, learning a new skill and social interaction and engagement.

Markwood said her agency, which runs the Eldercare Locator hotline and website, recognizes people might not be familiar with all of the resources in their community where older adults can find opportunities for this kind of activity — for instance, where they can find an exercise program for seniors — and that’s why NAAAAA launched its current campaign to get people talking about brain health this season.

But she also knows getting people to have these conversations is easier said than done, particularly when they involve a topic that could easily be misconstrued as an attack on someone’s intelligence and the complicated relationship between adult children and their aging parents. Markwood said people can
avoid these consequences by making sure the conversations take place in an informal setting and are done in a nonconfrontational manner.

“You want (your parents) to know that you’re concerned, but you don’t want to challenge them,” she said, referring to these discussions as a “kitchen table” conversation people can have while preparing a meal rather than a “dining room table conversation” that’s had in a more formal setting.

Outside of picking a safe venue for these conversations, Markwood said, people could also try easing into the discussions by waiting to have them at a proper moment, such as when their parents forget where they put their car keys or another small detail, talking about their own memory problems or talking about a friend whose parents might be having cognitive difficulties.

She said any one of these tactics makes it easier for the adult child to switch the topic of conversation to their parents’ mental health and that makes it more likely they’ll listen to its message and take the steps they need to improve their situation.