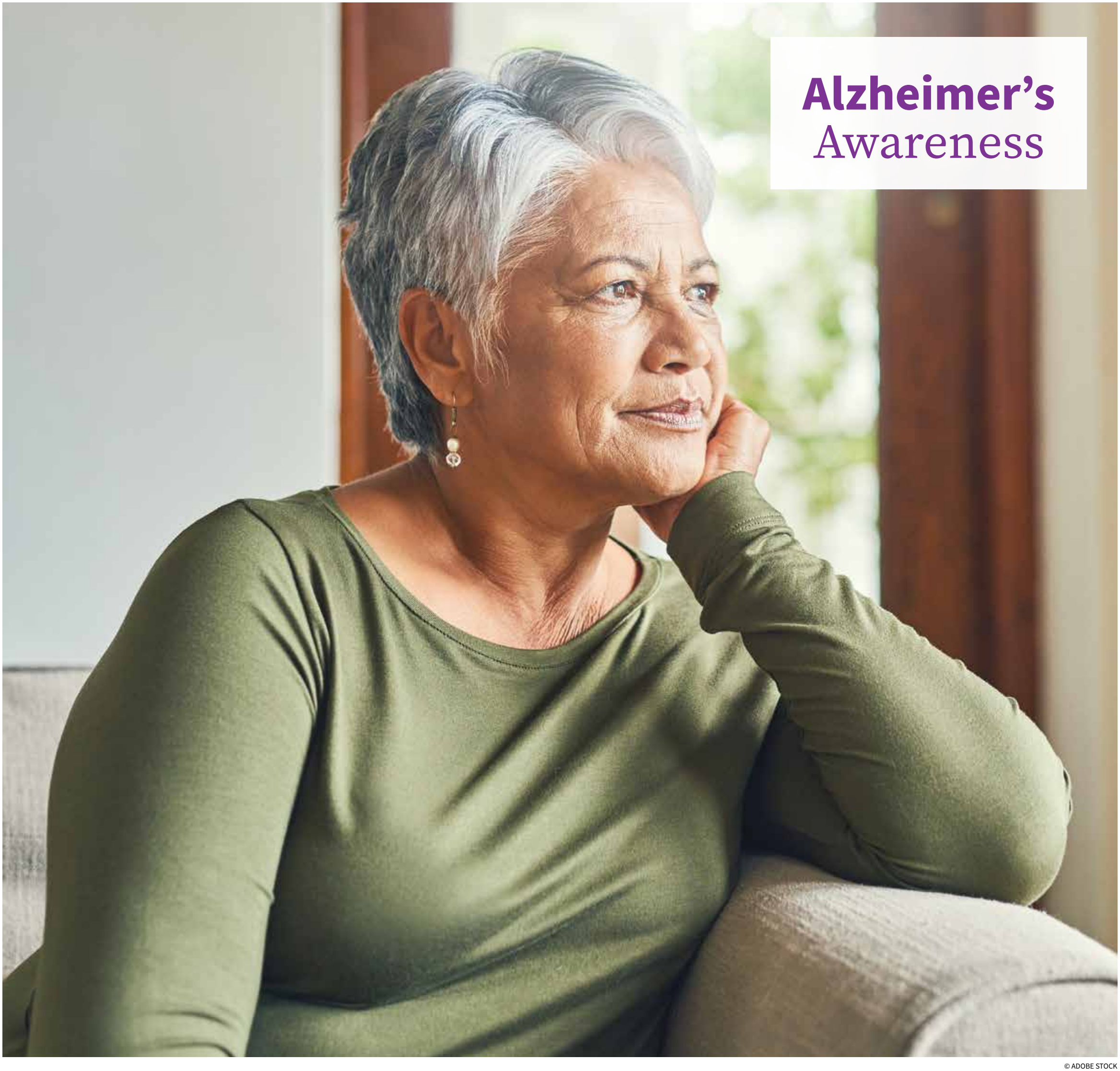
Alzheimer's Awareness



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Blood Tests and Alzheimer's

Some Alzheimer's patients may soon be able to track their disease by using blood tests.

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Johns Hopkins hospital last year announced its researchers developed a test that can improve chances for early detection and treatment of the disease, which affects about 7 million Americans.

"In the last few years, several therapies have been developed to ease Alzheimer's symptoms and slow progression of the disease," says neurologist Abhay Moghekar at Johns Hopkins. "These are very helpful, but our ultimate goal is to prevent Alzheimer's disease, not treat it once you have it. This blood test is an early step in the path to prevention."

The test has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for people who are 55 and older and have been medically assessed as experiencing cognitive decline.

"All of us have forgotten keys or misplaced glasses," he says. "But a medical assessment shows if a person has more than normal forgetfulness and if it affects their ability to function."

Primary care physicians and other health care professionals can order the blood test. It measures two proteins in the blood and calculates a ratio of these proteins to determine if amyloid plaque is present in the brain. Amyloid is a mis-folded protein that is an early sign of Alzheimer's disease. Patients with scores over the high end cutoff have more than a 90% likelihood of having Alzheimer's, Johns Hopkins says.

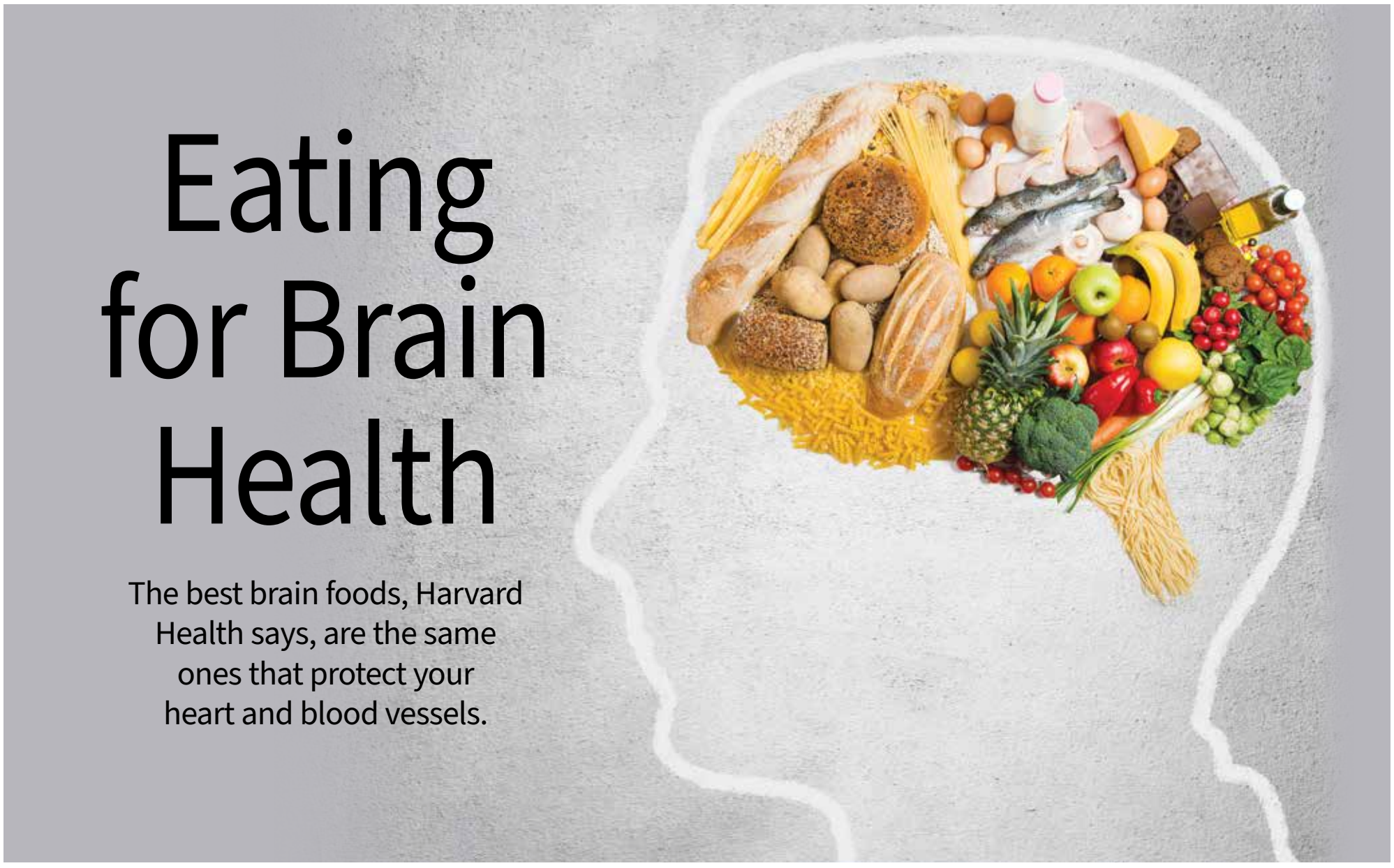
The blood test alone doesn't mean someone has Alzheimer's. Doctors must interpret the test results along with other information such as medical history, family history, cognitive testing and medications. They may recommend a patient see a neurologist, geriatrician or geriatric psychiatrist to determine if treatment for Alzheimer's is appropriate.

Before the blood test, Johns Hopkins says amyloid buildup could be detected through PET scans of the patient's brain or by analyzing cerebrospinal fluid. Both of these techniques can be stressful for patients, expensive and require specialized equipment. A genetic test can also help determine if a person is at high risk of developing Alzheimer's, but not whether they actually have it.

Moghekar says this test is just the beginning. Researchers are developing tests to detect tau, the protein tangles that indicate a more advanced stage of Alzheimer's. Along with this test, this could provide earlier, more definitive diagnoses, Moghekar says.

Eating for Brain Health

The best brain foods, Harvard Health says, are the same ones that protect your heart and blood vessels.



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Nutritionists say a diet full of fruits, vegetables, legumes and whole grains is a great start, along with protein from plant sources and fish and healthy fats rather than saturated fats.

PLANT-BASED FOODS MAY SLOW DECLINE

Harvard Health says leafy greens such as kale, spinach, collard greens and broccoli are rich in brain-healthy nutrients such as vitamin K, lutein, folate and beta carotene may help slow cognitive decline. Berries are another good choice. Flavonoids give berries their beautiful color and also can help improve memory, studies show. Harvard researchers found that women who consumed two or more servings of strawberries and blueberries each week delayed memory decline by up to 2.5 years.

PROTEIN FROM FATTY FISH

Fatty fish are sources of omega-3 fatty acids, the healthy unsaturated fats that have been linked to lower blood levels of beta-amyloid, the protein that forms damaging clumps in the brains of Alzheimer's patients. Harvard scientists say to choose fish low in mercury such as salmon, cod, canned light tuna and pollack. If you don't like fish, consider an omega-3 supplement or select other sources of omega-3s, such as flaxseed, avocado and walnuts.

DRINK TEA AND COFFEE

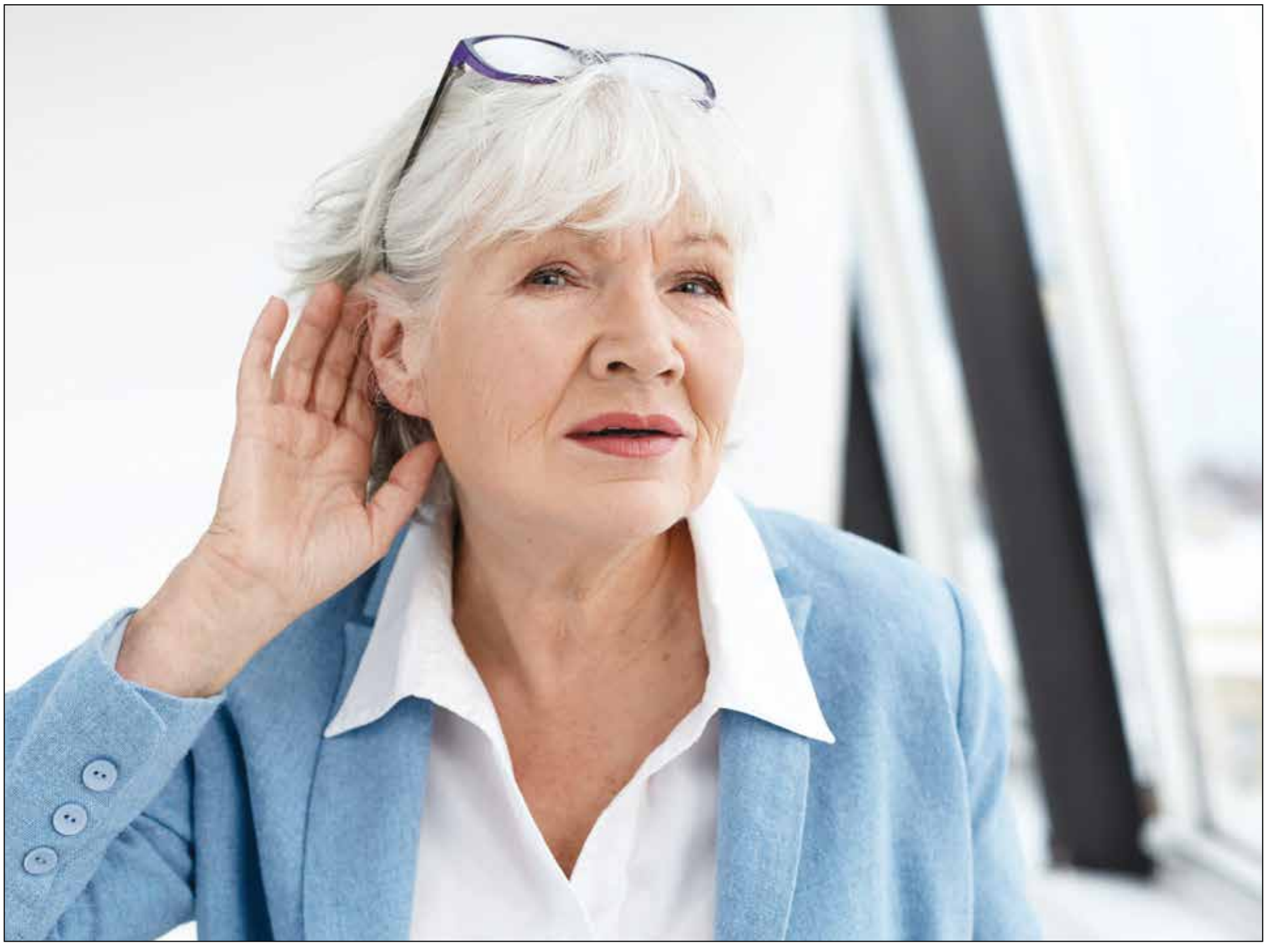
Johns Hopkins University research shows that the caffeine in your morning cup of coffee or tea may help your brain. In a study published in The Journal of Nutrition, researchers found participants with higher caffeine consumption scored better on tests of mental function. Other research shows caffeine may help solidify new memories. Johns Hopkins Researchers asked participants to study a series of images and take either a placebo or a caffeine tablet. More members of the caffeine group were able to correctly identify the images the following day, Harvard reports.

GET NUTTY

Harvard says walnuts and other nuts are great sources of protein and healthy fats. Walnuts in particular are high in a type of omega-3 fatty acid called alpha-linolenic acid that's linked to lower blood pressure and cleaner arteries. A UCLA study linked higher walnut consumption to improved cognitive test scores.

Hearing Loss and Alzheimer's

People who develop hearing problems during mid-life — ages 40-65 — may have an increased risk of developing dementia, says the Alzheimer's Society.



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Hearing problems could also be an early symptom of dementia, the organization says. Some evidence shows using hearing aids may reduce cognitive symptoms, the society says, and slow cognitive decline in people at risk of dementia. It's not clear yet whether using hearing aids can prevent dementia entirely.

TYPES OF HEARING LOSS

Age-related hearing loss is common among older people. It can start gradually and be difficult to notice. There are two types of hearing loss, the Alzheimer's Society says, peripheral hearing loss and central hearing loss. Peripheral hearing loss is the reduced abilities of the ears to detect sounds and increases the person's risk of developing dementia. Central hearing loss, the other type, involves problems with processing sounds in the brain and is not able to be corrected with hearing aids. It may be a very early symptom of Alzheimer's disease, the society says, as sound processing parts of the brain are affected by the disease.

RISK ASSOCIATED WITH HEARING LOSS

The Alzheimer's Society says the amount of hearing loss and length of time someone has hearing loss impacts dementia risk. It may mean that areas of the brain that help us understand sounds and speech have to work harder to understand what the sounds are. The additional effort may lead to changes in the brain that affects our memory and thinking abilities. The link is not fully understood, the society says, and researchers still haven't determined if hearing loss itself is a risk factor or an early symptom.

Nearly double the amount of people with mild hearing loss will develop dementia compared to those without loss. With moderate hearing loss, the Alzheimer's Society says the risk is tripled and was nearly five times with severe hearing loss. But even low levels of loss have been associated with increased dementia risk and a decrease in memory and thinking skills, the society says.

Hearing loss is also linked to quicker shrinkage of areas of the brain responsible for processing sounds and memories.

The Psychology of Color

Color is an important part of how we experience the world. It can stimulate appetite, promote greater participation and influence feelings.

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Caregivers of people with dementia can use color to help them experience a better quality of life, Crestview Methodist Retirement Communities says.

WHITE

In general, Crestview says white is a difficult color for those with dementia to see. An all-white room may look circular and make it difficult to distinguish doors and walls. Food may be more difficult to see on a white plate and all-white bedding will blend together. The memory care facility says to consider painting accent walls or creating colorful focal points in an all-white room. Paint doors a different color so patients can find their way in and out of the space. Use colored plates, specifically red, to stimulate appetite and help patients see their food more clearly.

RED

Red colors promote participation and can be used to motivate activity. Red shoes, Crestview says, may promote walking and a red door may get patients out of their room more often. It's also known to stimulate appetite, making it a good choice for dinnerware. Be careful, though, red clothing can be intimidating for patients.

BLACK

Black is associated with grief and mourning and, for dementia patients, people wearing black may feel threatening or intimidating. People with Lewy Body Dementia can be especially triggered by black clothing below the knee. Avoid wearing black parts or shoes around patients and opt for lighter colors. Avoid black rugs, mats or flooring because people with dementia may perceive them as a hole in the floor.

BLUE

Blue is a great color to wear when visiting a loved one or purchasing items for their space. It's a color of relaxation and is a great choice for a room where they may spend a lot of time. The color may help people experience decreased feelings of confusion and increased feelings of concentration.

PURPLE

This color, Crestview says, stimulates imagination and spirituality. You may choose to use the color to draw a patient's attention to items that are more valuable or special. Crestview suggests a purple photo album with pictures of their loved ones.

YELLOW

Yellow inspires feelings of happiness and studies show people tend to smile more in yellow rooms, Crestview says, and people with dementia tend to wander into yellow rooms and stay there for a longer period of time compared to other colors.

Validation Therapy

Validation therapy is a strategy for communicating with people who have dementia.

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It emphasizes listening to the person, reminiscing with them, and rephrasing their thoughts to validate their feelings, regardless of how they expressed them. It can help the patients feel heard by addressing their emotions with empathy, Verywell Health says.

WHAT IS VALIDATION THERAPY?

Validation therapy can help people with dementia navigate the emotions behind negative behaviors. It's based on the theory that challenging behavior is driven by unmet needs and the frustration of experiencing emotions that do not or cannot find another outlet for expression. These feelings can lead to agitation, delusions and other negative behaviors. The therapy was developed between 1963 and 1980 by Naomi Feil, a social worker who grew up in a family immersed in the care of older people.

HOW DO YOU USE VALIDATION THERAPY?

The first step in validation therapy is to center yourself before engaging with the patient. Take a deep breath, slow down and think. Ask the patient questions about what they're talking about. If they ask to go home while at home, ask what their house looks like. Let the patient express their feelings on their own timeline. Ask if they miss their home, what they miss the most. Acknowledge and match their emotions. Rephrase their feelings back to them, reassuring them that you understand and feel their emotions. Work to decrease their anxiety by expressing what they're feeling. Engage their senses by asking what color the house was, what it smelled like. Maybe certain flowers bloomed outside or maybe their mom wore a certain scent they remember.

EFFECTIVENESS OF VALIDATION THERAPY

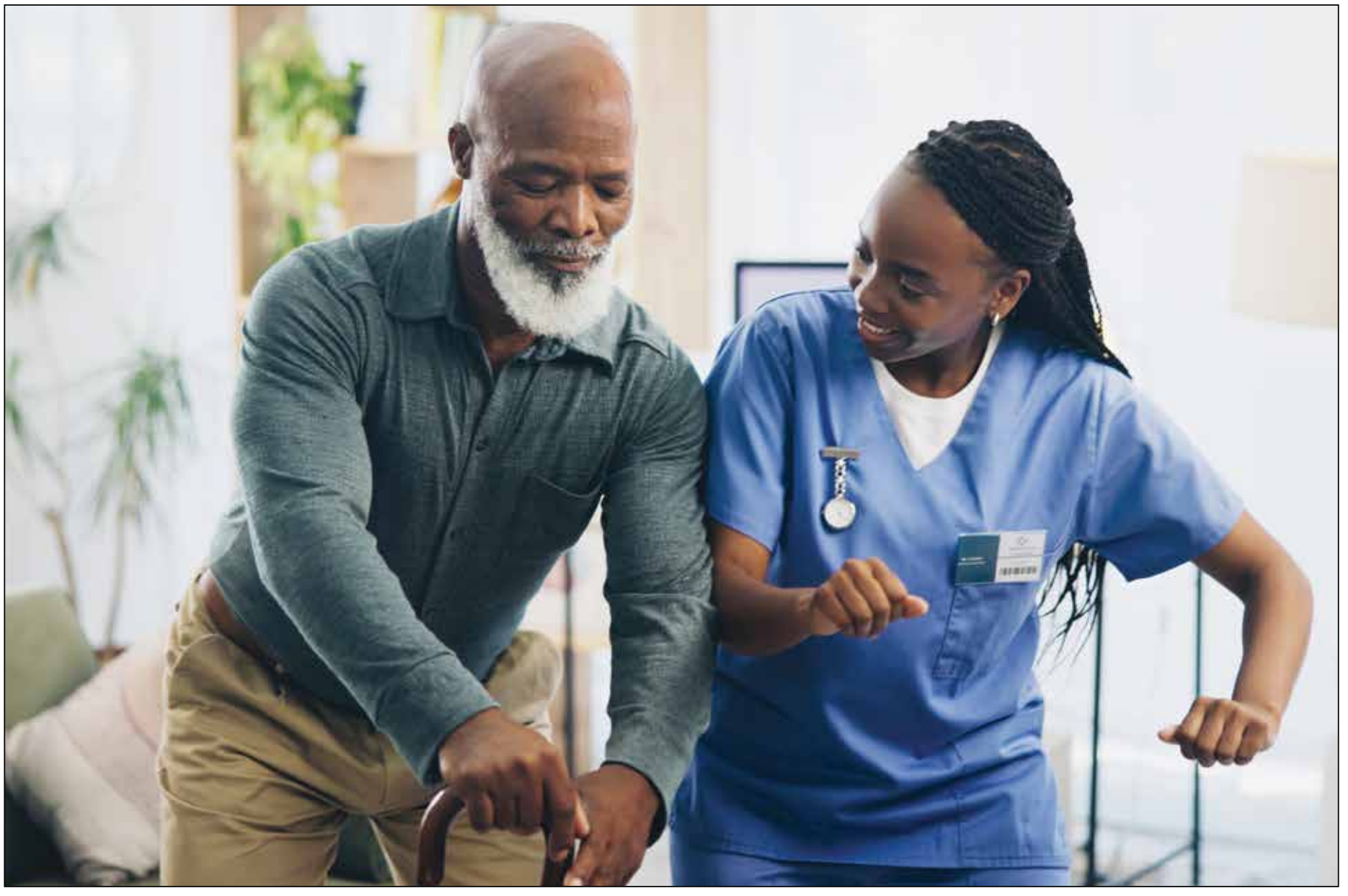
Research on how effective validation therapy is mixed, Verywell Health says.

A 2024 study involved 41 families who recorded caregiver interactions with their loved ones. Researchers found validation therapy methods improved cooperation with care and limited distress.

In a 2021 study involving nurses, researchers found validation therapy methods to improve quality of life and prevent harm. But a 2018 review of studies showed that while validation therapy does not have harmful effects the evidence of its benefit is limited.

Using the Senses in Caregiving

Sensory stimulation is the sensation the body receives when one or more senses is engaged.



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It's important for infant development and can also be used to improve the quality of life for developmentally disabled adults and older adults, Healthline says. Humans have five basic senses, including vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Sensory stimulation for people with cognitive disorders, such as Alzheimer's, means using the senses to evoke positive feelings.

SOME SENSORY ACTIVITIES FOR ALZHEIMER'S PATIENTS

Healthline recommends these sensory activities for people with neurocognitive disorders:

- Preparing or cooking food.
- Playing board games or working on puzzles.
- Singing or playing instruments.
- Painting or drawing.
- Receiving a hand massage.
- Dancing or walking.

A 2018 study found that sensory and memory stimulation has the potential to improve dementia-specific issues for people living in long-term care settings. The researchers in that study said dementia-specific challenging behaviors such as wandering, pacing, verbal agitation and poor eating habits improved after reminiscence and sensory therapies. In particular, childhood images and music had a particularly calming effect, as did aromatherapy and massage.

However, it wasn't all successful. The study found some residents grew impatient when asked to select music, disliked aromatherapy or grew agitated when asked about food during meals.

"Those residents receiving cognitive stimulation had better results when they lived in the community versus those who lived in facilities," the study says. "The personality of each resident should be taken into consideration when implementing a sensory or memory intervention."

AROMATHERAPY USE

A 2002 study found that aromatherapy is a promising treatment. In placebo trials, researchers found patient behavior improved when aromatherapy is used. The two main scents used in the trials were lemon balm and lavender oil applied either to the skin or by inhalation. Almost all of the patients completed the aromatherapy, the study noted, which is significant. It said it was common for 30% or more of the participants to be able to complete pharmacological treatments. The aromatherapy then, was not only successful, but also better tolerated.

"People with dementia are among the most vulnerable in our society," the study says. "Symptoms often need to be treated expediently, and drugs, although moderately effective, can be hazardous. Aromatherapy … (seems) to be safe and effective and may have an important role in managing behavioral problems in people with dementia."

Finding an Elder Care Attorney

Elder care attorneys are legal professionals who understand legal, financial and health care challenges faced by older people.

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They not only help write wills, they also support families by navigating long-term care plans, Medicare and Medicaid planning, Social Security benefits and more, the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys says.

COMPREHENSIVE SERVICE

NAELA says some of the key services an elder care attorney offers include:

- Drafting wills, trusts, power of attorney documents and developing strategies to preserve assets.
- Understanding eligibility requirements and health care benefits for long-term care.
- Advising families on assisted living, nursing home care and home-based care options.
- Helping families establish legal guardianship.
- Identifying and preventing financial exploitation and abuse.
- Assisting with disability benefits and income support.

FINDING AN ELDER CARE ATTORNEY

NAELA has a lawyer search on its website to help families find representation. A NAELA member attorney, the organization says, understands elder law and is committed to providing effective, ethical legal representation. They have specialized training in elder law and actively participate in continuing education programs. They also agree to uphold NAELA's Aspirational Standards when navigating difficult ethical issues.

You can also use your state's bar association or Council on Aging to find an attorney, and some states even have free legal helplines for older people needing legal help. When looking at attorneys, ask about their experience in elder care law. Make sure you understand their fee structure and that they work well with your family.

WHEN TO HIRE AN ELDER CARE ATTORNEY

Don't wait for a crisis to establish a relationship with an elder care attorney. Hire one proactively when facing early stage cognitive decline or planning for end-of-life care. Powers of attorney and other health care directives must be made while the person still has the capacity to sign documents.

An elder care attorney can also help protect the person's assets before assisted living care or nursing home care before permanent penalties apply. They can also fill in the blanks on any missing documents and help spot any signs of elder abuse or exploitation. The attorneys can also make sure your plan stays up to date.