When you reach for that bottle of vitamin C or fish oil pills, you might wonder how well they’ll work and if they’re safe. The first thing to ask yourself is whether you need them in the first place.

More than half of all Americans take one or more dietary supplements daily or on occasion. Supplements are available without a prescription and usually come in pill, powder, or liquid form. Common supplements include vitamins, minerals, and herbal products, also known as botanicals.

“Deciding whether to take dietary supplements and which ones to take is a serious matter,” says Coates. “Learn about their potential benefits and any risks they may pose first.”

People take these supplements to make sure they get enough essential nutrients and to maintain or improve their health, but not everyone needs to take supplements. If you are considering taking supplements, you should discuss it with your doctor.

“It’s possible to get all of the nutrients you need by eating a variety of healthy foods, so you don’t have to take one,” says Carol Haggans, a registered dietitian and consultant to NIH, “but supplements can be useful for filling in gaps in your diet.”

Evidence does suggest some supplements can enhance health in different ways. The most popular nutrient supplements are multivitamins, calcium, and vitamins B, C, and D.

To make it easy to find reliable information, NIH has fact sheets on dietary supplements at ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/list-all/. NIH also recently launched an online Dietary Supplement Label Database at www.dsld.nlm.nih.gov. This free database lets you look up the ingredients of thousands of dietary supplements. It includes information from the label on dosage, health claims, and cautions.