

# Character Builder 您好嗎？

The basic unit of the Chinese language is the *zi* (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each *zi* has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string *zi* together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each *zi* is pronounced in one of four tones:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest)

To pronounce each *zi* below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about the digestive system



Putonghua pronunciation: *yan1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yin1*

Meanings: swallow

咽 has radical 口 (*kou3*, mouth). Eating involves 咬嚼 (*yao3 jue2* = biting~chewing), 吞咽 (*tun1 yan1* = swallowing). 食道 (*shi2 dao4* = eat/food-channel) = alimentary canal. Kids/oldsters should 細細嚼, 慢慢咽 (*xi4 xi0 jue2, man4 man0 yan1* = fine~fine~chew, slow~slow~swallow = chew, swallow food carefully).

咽喉 (*yan1 hou2* = swallow~throat) means throat or militarily-important narrow passageway. Wife 哽咽 (*geng3 ye4* = choke~swallow = sobs) as dying husband 咽氣 (*yan1 qi4* = swallow~breath = gasps for air).

狼吞虎咽 (*lang2 tun1 hu3 yan1* = wolf~swallow~tiger~swallow) describes glutton gobbling/eating. Gourmet 垂涎 (*chui2 yan2* = drip~saliva = lusts for) delicacies, but says junk-food 不能下咽 (*bu4 neng2 xia4 yan1* = no~can~down~swallow = is absolutely inedible).

by Diana Yue