

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:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

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

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

4th 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 breathing

呼 (radical 口 *kou3* = mouth)

Putonghua pronunciation: *xi1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *kap1*

Meanings: inhale, suck, absorb

吸 = in-take through mouth/nose. “深呼吸!” (*shen1 hu1 xi1* = deep-exhale~inhale) = “Take a deep breath!” 吸管 (*xi1 guan3* = suck~pipe) = drinking-straw. 吸煙 (*xi1 yan1* = suck~smoke) = smoking cigarettes. Addicts 吸海洛英 (*xi1 hai3 luo4 ying1* = smoke~"heroin"-transliterated). 吸煤氣 (*xi1 mei2 qi4* = suck/breathe-in~coal-gas) can cause coma/death.

Students 吸收 (*xi1 shou1* = suck~gather = absorb) knowledge. Honey 吸引 (*xi1 yin3* = suck~lure = attracts) ants. Octopus's arms have 吸盤 (*xi1 pan2* = suck~pan = suction-cups). Newton discovered 地心吸力 (*di4 xin1 xi1 li4* = land/earth~centre~suck~power = power of gravity).

吸血鬼 (*xi1 xue3 gui3* = suck~blood~ghosts) describes loan sharks. 吸血殭屍 (*xi1 xue3 jiang1 shi1* = suck~blood~stiff/rigid~corpse) = vampires.