

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 dental care

牙

Putonghua pronunciation: *ya2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *nga4*

Meanings: tooth, teeth

牙 = 牙齒 (*ya2 chi3* = teeth). Etymologically, 牙 meant convex-surface tooth, 齒 meant concave-surface tooth. 牙床 (*ya2 chuang2* = teeth-bed) = 牙齦 (*ya2 yin2* = teeth~border) = gums/gingiva.

Baby/toddler develops 乳牙 (*ru3 ya2* = milk/primary~teeth), 牙牙學語 (*ya2 ya2 xue2 yu3* = “ya-ya”~learn~words = make first speech-sounds). Adults have 門牙 (*men2 ya2* = door~teeth = front teeth/incisors), 大牙 (*da3 ya2* = big~teeth/molars).

刷牙 (*shua1 ya2* = brushing~teeth), 漱口 (*sou4 kou3* = rinsing~mouth), using 牙膏 (*ya2 gao1* = tooth~paste), 牙線 (*ya2 xian4* = tooth~thread = dental floss) improve 口腔衛生 (*kou3 qiang1 wei4 sheng1* = mouth~cavity~guard~life = oral hygiene). 咬牙切齒 (*yao3 ya2 qie4 chi3* = bite~teeth~cut~teeth) describes angry person's teeth-grinding/agitated expression.

by Diana Yue