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 cancers

块 (radical 土 tu3, earth/soil) means lump/piece: 木塊 (mu4 kuai4 = wood-piece = pieces of wood), 冰塊 (bing1 kuai4 = ice-piece = ice-cube/iceberg), 一小塊布 (y1 xiao3 kuai4 bu4 = a-small-piece-of-cloth), 一大塊地 (yi1 da4 kuai4 di4 = a-big-piece/patch-of-land).

Pastry-chef forms dough into 薄塊 (bao2 kuai4 = thin-slices/pieces/layers). 大塊頭 (da4 kuai4 tou2 = big-piece-head = big/heavy/burly guy) likes steak in 厚塊 (hou4 kuai4 = thick-slices/chunks). Shards are 碎塊 (sui4 kuai4 = broken-pieces) of pottery.

Woman menstruating bleeds 血塊 (xue3 kuai4 = blood-lump = thick/coagulated blood). Body scan reveals 塊狀物 (kuai4 zhuang4 wu4 = lump-shaped-object = lump/lumps) in uterus. Operation costs total 十萬塊錢 (shi2 wan4 kuai4 qian2 = ten-ten-thousand-pieces-of-money = 100,000 dollars).

by Diana Yue