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 body-checks

Putonghua pronunciation: yan4
Cantonese pronunciation: yim6
Meaning: check, examine, test, inspect, prove to be effective

驗 (radical 马 ma3, horse) means 試驗 (shi4 yan4 = try/explore-experiment), 實驗 (shi2 yan4 = practical-experiment), 測驗 (ce1 yan4 = test-examination). Scientists 驗證 (yan4 zheng4 = check-to-verify) facts. Believers say oracle’s prophesy 驗靈 (ling2 yan4 = spirit-verify = is accurate, will come true).

Optometrists 驗眼 (yan4 yan3 = check-eyes = perform eye-checks). Accident victim 驗傷 (yan4 shang1 = is-checked-for-injuries). 驗屍 (yan4 shi1 = examine-corpses) = autopsy.

化驗室 (hua4 yan4 shi4 = chemical-examination/experiment-room = scientific laboratories) 驗血 (yan4 xue3 = check-blood samples), 驗尿 (yan4 niao4 = check-urine), 驗膽固醇 (yan4 dan3 gu4 chun2 = check-bile-solid-alcohol = check cholesterol).
Cancer patient takes 檢驗 (jian3 yan4 = examinations-checks), accepts 考驗 (kao3 yan4 = test-check = trials/ordeals).

by Diana Yue