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: jing1
Cantonese pronunciation: ging1
Meaning: fear, alarm, stir, startle, fright, scare, surprise, shock, disquiet, consternation

驚 (radical 馬 ma3, horse) means 驚訝 (jing1 ya4 = shocked-surprised), 驚慌 (jing1 huang1 = fear-fright). War photos 觸目驚心 (chu4 mu4 jing1 xin1 = touch-eyes-frighten-heart = look scary/disturbing). Lottery-winner 驚喜 (jing1 xi3 = is surprised-happily).

Nightmare 驚醒 (jing1 xing3 = startles-wakes) sleeper. 5-20 March is 驚蛰 (jing1 zhe2 = Awakening-of-Insects), third of lunar calendar’s twenty-four 節氣 (jie2 qi4 = section-breath/weather = solar terms).

Cancer spreads at 驚人 (jing1 ren2 = frighten-people = frightful/amazing/shocking) speed. Patient 處變不驚 (chu4 bian4 bu4 jing1 = situated-in-change-not-frightened = stays calm despite calamity), but wife 大驚失色 (da4 jing1 shi1 se1 = big-alarm-lose-color = pales with fright), 擔驚受怕 (dan1 jing1 shou4 pa4 = carry-fear-receive-fright = suffers consternation).

by Diana Yue