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 Alzheimer’s disease

腦 (nào3)
Cantonese pronunciation: no5
Meaning: brain, mind

Memory stick in 腦海 (nào3 hai3 = brain's-sea = the mind). 左腦 (zuo3 nà3 = left-brain), 右腦 (you4 nà3 = right-brain) serve different functions. 電腦學 (di4 nà3 xüe2 = electric-brain-study) = computer studies.

Teacher tells student: 用腦! (yong4 nào3 = use-brain = think!)
Writer 絞腦汁 (jiào3 nà3 zhí1 = wring-brain's-juice = rack brains), 動腦筋 (dòn4 nà3 jin2 = move/exercise-brain-tendons = think, look for ideas).

Patients of 阿爾海默氏病 (a4 zì1 hai3 mo4 shì4 bìn4 = “Alzheimer”’s-transliterated-disease = Alzheimer’s disease) suffer from 腦退化 (nào3 tuì4 huà4 = brain-retreat-transform = brain’s deterioration), often 抓腦袋 (zhua1 nào3 dài4 = scratch-brain-sack = scratches head) forgetfully.

by Diana Yue