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 the digestive system

肠 (radical 月 = 肉 rou4, meat/flesh) means intestines. 喉 (hou2, throat), 胃 (wei4, stomach), 小肠 (xiao3 chang2 = small-intestine), 大肠 (da4 chang3 = big-intestine = colon) constitute
食道 (shi2 dao4 = eat/food-channel = alimentary canal).

肠气 (xiao3 chang3 qi4 = small-intestine-gas = hernia), 肠胃炎 (chang3 wei4 yan2 = intestines-stomach-fever = enterogastritis), 盲肠炎 (mang2 chang3 yan2 = blind-intestine-fever = appendix inflammation = appendicitis) are unwelcome ailments. 断肠人 (duan4 chang3 ren2 = intestines-broken/ severed-person) means heart-broken person/lover.

香肠 (xiang1 chang3 = flavorsome-sausage) is western sausage (Vienna sausage, frankfurter etc.) 臘腸 (la4 chang3 = wind-dried/preserved-sausage) is Chinese sausage. Cantonese people who don’t know English facetiously call the English writing-script 雞腸 (ji1 chang3 = chicken’s-intestitines, i.e., strange/indecipherable coils).

Putonghua pronunciation: chang2
Cantonese pronunciation: cheung4
Meanings: intestine

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