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 drugs and medicines

丸

Putonghua pronunciation: wan2
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen2
Meanings: pill, pellet, bead, bolus, small ball

丸 (homophone of 圓 wan2, round/circle) means petite sphere/ball: 丸子 (wan2 zi0 = round-diminutive), 肉丸 (rou4 wan2 = meat-balls), 湯丸 (tang1 wan2 = soup-balls = boiled dough-balls). 彈弓 (dan4 gong1 = bounce-bow = slingshot) and 泥丸 (ni2 wan2 = mud-pellets) is kid’s weapon.

Doctors prescribe 藥丸 (yao4 wan2 = medicinal-pills/bolus). 臘丸 (la4 wan2 = wax-pellet) = powdered-medicine in spherical wax case. Pessimists need 定心丸 (ding4 xin1 wan2 = steady-heart-pill = reassuring message/promise).

Hong Kong, though 彈丸之地 (dan4 wan2 zhi1 di4 = sling-pellet-’s-land = tiny place), has colorful colloquialisms: 食丸 (shi2 wan2 = Cantonese sik6 yuen2 = eat-pills) = take contraceptives; 食丸仔 (shi2 wan2 zai3 = Cantonese sik2 yuen2 jai2 = take-pill-diminutive) = take drugs.

by Diana Yue