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 fatty foods

滞 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) describes sluggish/stopped flow. 滞後 (zhi4 hou4 = sluggish-behind) = lagging behind. Flight-delay makes passengers滞留 (zhi4 hou2 = sluggish-stay = stay behind) at airport. Plan meets 阻滞 (zu3 zhi4 = obstruct- sluggish = obstruction), is stalled.

Idiot目光呆滞 (mu4 guang1 dai1 zhi4 = eyes-brightness-dull-stagnant = has slow-witted/blank-looking eyes). Market 停滞不前 (ting2 zhi4 bu4 qian2 = stop-lags-not-advance = shows no progress), bonds 滞銷 (zhi4 xiao1 = sluggish-sell = don’t sell well).

大便 (da4 bian4 = big-convenience) = faeces. 吃滞 (chi4 zhi4 = Cantonese 食滞 sik6 jai6 = eat-sluggish = over-eating causing sluggish digestion) affects 排便 (pai2 bian4 = discharge-of-faeces = bowels-discharge), causes 便秘 (bian4 mi4 = convenience-secret = constipation).

by Diana Yue