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 obesity

肉 (rou4)
Cantonese pronunciation: yuk6
Meanings: flesh, meat

肉體 (rou4 ti3 = flesh-body) means physical body. Prostitutes 賣肉 (mai4 rou4 = sell-flesh/body). Children are parents' 骨肉 (gu3 rou4 = bone-flesh = flesh and blood).

Butchers sell 肥肉 (fei2 rou4 = fatty-meat), 瘦肉 (shou4 rou4 = lean-meat). Eateries serve 肉包子 (rou4 bao1 zi0 = meat-wrap-diminutive = meat buns). 食肉獸 (shi2 rou4 shou4 = eat-meat-beast) means carnivores or big steak-eaters.

Voluptuous women are 肉感 (rou4 gan3 = flesh-feel = attractively fleshy), 珠圓玉潤 (zhu1 yuan2 yu4 run4 = pearl-round-jade-luscious = lusciously plump). Obese people have 贅肉 (zhui4 rou4 = superfluous-flesh), large 三圍 (san1 wei2 = three-surround = top, middle, bottom measurements). 贻肉横生 (jian4 rou4 heng2 sheng1 = cheap-flesh-horizontal-grow) describes ugly flesh bulging.

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