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

肚
Putonghua pronunciation: du4  
Cantonese pronunciation: to5  
Meanings: stomach, belly, womb

肚, also 肚子 (du4 ziO = stomach-diminutive), 肚皮 (du4 pi2 = stomach-skin), often means 胃 (wei4, stomach). Hungry person yells “肚子餓了!” (du4 zi e4 le0 = stomach-feel-hungry = “I’m hungry!”) Famine victims 餓肚皮 (e4 du4 pi2 = starve-stomach = go without food).

Obese people have 大肚子 (da4 du4 ziO = big/bulging belly). 大了肚子 (da4 le0 du4 ziO = get-big-ed-belly) describes woman who got pregnant. 挺胸凸肚 (ting3 xiong1 tu1 du4 = prop-up-chest-protrude-belly) describes self-important person’s arrogant pose.

Drinkers get high after 三杯下肚 (san1 bei1 xia4 du4 = three-cups-down-stomach = having downed a few drinks). Dirty food makes diners 拉肚子 (la1 du4 ziO = pull-stomach = have diarrhea).

by Diana Yue