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 dental care

Putonghua pronunciation: zhu4
Cantonese pronunciation: jue3
Meanings: eat, erode

蛀 (radical 虫 chong2 = worm/bug) means gnaw/eat away materials. 蛀蟲 (zhu4 chong2 = eating-worms/bugs = clothing moths/woodworms) include 衣魚 (yi1 yu2 = clothes-fish = silverfish/bookworm), 米象 (mi3 xiang4 = rice-elephant = rice weevil).


Dentist warns: 吃糖 (chi1 tang2 = eating-sugar/candy), 吸煙 (xi1 yan1 = inhale-smoke/cigarette = smoking) cause 牙垢 (ya2 gou4 = teeth-dirt = tartar), 牙菌斑 (ya2 jün1 ban1 = teeth-bacteria/microorganisms-patch = dental plaque), 牙周炎 (ya2 zhou1 yan2 = teeth-around-inflammation = periodontitis). “蛀牙” (zhu4 ya2 = eaten-teeth) = “齲齒” qü3 chi3 = sick-teeth = dental caries), means decayed/rotten tooth.