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 medication effects

倦 (jüan4)
Cantonese pronunciation: guen6
Meanings: tired, fatigue, bored


Traveler settles down after 倦游 (jüan4 you2 = tiring-journey). Campaigner 厌倦 (yan4 jüan4 = disgusted-with-tired-of) politics develops 倦意 (jüan4 yi4 = tired-feeling), contemplates retirement. 鳥倦知還 (niao3 jüan4 zhi1 huan2 = bird-tired-knows-return) describes person tired of quest returning to home/origin.

Patient under medication 易倦 (yi4 jüan4 = easy-tired = gets tired easily), 一脸倦容 (li4 lian3 jüan4 yong2 = one-face-tired-look = shows a tired face).

by Diana Yue