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 hospitalization

Putonghua pronunciation: bu3
Cantonese pronunciation: bo2
Meaning: mend, repair, remedy, add, replenish, patch, fill vacated position


Epidemic-fighters request 補助 (bu3 zhu4 = additional-aid/funding), 補給 (bu3 gei3 = replenish-give = replenishments). 補薪 (bu3 xin1 = remedy-salary = back-pay) 補救 (bu3 jiù4 = repairs-redeems) employer-employees’ relationship.

Chinese concept 補身 (bu3 shēn1 = repairing/replenishing-body’s-vitality) means eating 補品 (bu3 pin3 = nourishing-things/foods e.g. 燕窩 yan4 wō1 = birds nest, i.e. swallow’s saliva dried), 補藥 (bu3 yao4 = health-replenishing-medicinal-concoctions). Newly-operated patient 虛不受補 (xū1 bu4 shōu4 bu3 = empty-no-receive-replenish = is too weak to absorb nutrients/nourishment).