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

痛 (radical 广 chuang2, illness) means 痛苦 (tong4 ku3 = physical/mental pain-suffering): 疼痛 (teng2 tong4 = ache-pain), 傷痛 (shang1 tong4 = hurt-pain/sorrow), 痛哭 (tong4 ku1 = unrestrained-wailing). Lads 痛打 (tong4 da3 = thoroughly-beat-up) bully, feel 痛快 (tong1 kuai4 = heartily-cheered).

止痛藥 (zhi3 tong4 yao4 = stop-pain-medicine = pain-killers) can 鎮痛 (zhen4 tong4 = suppress-pain): 頭疼 (tou2 teng3 = head-ache), 胃疼 (wei4 teng3 = stomach-ache), 經痛 (jing1 tong4 = menstrual-pain).

痛風 (tong4 feng1 = pain-wind) = gout. 隱隱作痛 (yin3 in3 zuo2 tong4 = faintly-faintly-produce-pain) = feel dull pain. However, 隱痛 (yin3 tong4 = hidden-pain) means unspeakable/unspoken sorrow. 痛定思痛 (tong4 ding4 si1 tong4 = pain-calm-think/reflect-pain) describes hurt/defeated person reviewing painful experience.

by Diana Yue