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

瀉 (radical 水 = water shui3, water) means overflow. Waterfall 傾瀉 (qing1 xie4 = plunges-spashes). Rain-water 流瀉 (liu2 xie4 = flows-spills/spreads). Poet compares music to 水銀瀉地 (shui3 yin2 xie4 di4 = mercury-spilt-on-floor), infiltrating all corners.

Beer-drinkers pour till mugs 滿瀉 (man3 xie3 = full-spill-over). Cantonese colloquialism 倒瀉籮蟹 (dao3 xie3 luo2 xie4 = Cantonese do2 se3 loh4 haai5 = pour-overflow-basket-crabs = basket containing crabs overturned) describes uncontrollable/embarrassing situation.

痢疾 (li4 ji2 = dysentery-disease = disentery) causes 上吐下瀉 (shang4 tu4 xia4 xie4 = up-vomit-down-diarrhea = vomiting and diarrhea). 瀉藥 (xie4 yao4 = bowels-relief-medicine) = laxative.

止瀉藥 (zhi3 xie4 yao4 = stop-diarrhea-medicine = anti-diarheal drug) stops 拉肚子 (la1 du4 zi0 = pull/excrete-stomach-diarrhea).

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