The basic unit of the Chinese language is the 组 (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each 组 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 组 together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each 组 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 组 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 fever

退 Putonghua pronunciation: tui4
Cantonese pronunciation: tui3
Meaning: retreat, recede, ebb, back down


Enemy 退兵 (tui4 bing1 = withdraws-army). We 敵退我進 (di2 jin4 wo3 tui4 = enemy-retreats-I/we-advance = pursue them). They 進退失據 (jin4 tui4 shi1 jü4 = advance-or-retreat-lose-reason = don't know whether to advance or retreat). Veteran 退伍 (tui4 wu3 = retires-from-army).

Patient 退燒 (tui4 shao1 = retreat-burn = temperature drops to normal), 退回 (tui4 hui2 = retreat-return = sends back) remaining medicine.

by Diana Yue