



SMART HEADACHE ANALYZER

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Cite This Article: C. Narayanan, S. Sathish, S. Sitharasan, M. Sriabinesh & P. Vishal, "Smart Headache Analyzer", Indo American Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Review, Volume 10, Issue 1, January - June, Page Number 87-93, 2026.

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Type of Review: Peer Reviewed as per |C|O|P|E| Guidance.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19658036>

Abstract:

This project presents a smart wearable system designed in the form of a neckband for identifying headache patterns using physiological signature mapping. The system continuously monitors key physiological signals such as heart rate variability (HRV), muscle activity (EMG), skin temperature, and electrodermal activity (EDA) in a non-invasive manner. These signals are acquired through integrated sensors placed around the neck and ear region to ensure accurate data collection and user comfort. The acquired data is processed using an ESP32 microcontroller, where multiple physiological parameters are combined to form unique signatures corresponding to different types of headaches, including migraine, tension-type, and stress-induced headaches. The system performs real-time analysis and classification, thereby reducing dependence on subjective pain reporting. Wireless communication enables continuous monitoring through mobile or cloud platforms. The proposed neckband design ensures comfort, portability, and suitability for long-term use, making it effective for personalized healthcare and early diagnosis.

Key Words: Headache Detection, Physiological Signature Mapping, Heart Rate Variability, Electromyography, Electrodermal Activity, ESP32, Wearable Healthcare, IoT, Machine Learning, Neckband.

Introduction:

Headaches represent one of the most prevalent and disabling neurological conditions globally, affecting an estimated 50% of the adult population at least once per year according to the World Health Organization (WHO). The Global Burden of Disease study consistently ranks headache disorders particularly migraine among the top ten causes of years lived with disability (YLD) worldwide. Despite their widespread prevalence, headaches remain significantly under diagnosed and undertreated, partly due to their subjective nature and the reliance on patient-reported symptom scales for clinical assessment.

The International Classification of Headache Disorders (ICHD-3), published by the International Headache Society, categorizes headaches into primary headache disorders including migraine, tension-type headache (TTH), and cluster headache and secondary headache disorders caused by underlying conditions. Each primary headache type is associated with distinct pathophysiological mechanisms, making accurate classification critical for effective treatment. Migraine, for instance, involves cortical spreading depression and trigeminal nerve activation, manifesting in distinct autonomic and vascular changes that can be measured through physiological signals. Tension-type headaches, in contrast, are associated with pericranial muscle tension and elevated electromyographic (EMG) activity. Stress-induced headaches involve elevated sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activity, reflected in increased electrodermal activity (EDA) and altered heart rate variability (HRV).

The emergence of wearable computing, miniaturized biosensors, and low-power wireless microcontrollers has created an unprecedented opportunity to develop continuous, objective, non-invasive monitoring tools for neurological conditions such as headaches. Unlike conventional clinical assessment tools pain visual analogue scales (VAS), headache diaries, and periodic clinical examinations wearable physiological monitoring systems can capture the real-time autonomic, muscular, and thermal signatures associated with headache events before, during, and after their occurrence.

This project introduces a novel smart neckband wearable system that leverages the form factor of a comfortable, around-the-neck wearable to house multiple biosensors a MAX30102 PPG sensor for HRV analysis, a MyoWare/AD8232 EMG sensor for muscle activity detection, an MLX90614 infrared

temperature sensor for skin temperature monitoring, and a GSR module for electrodermal activity measurement. The ESP32 microcontroller serves as the central processing and wireless communication hub, acquiring, filtering, and processing the multimodal physiological data stream in real time. A fusion algorithm combines the multi-channel physiological signatures into a composite headache indicator, which is then classified using machine learning models trained on labeled headache data. Results are transmitted wirelessly to a companion mobile application or web dashboard for continuous monitoring and early alerting.

The neckband form factor was specifically chosen because it provides a stable, ergonomic platform near physiological signal sources – the carotid artery for PPG-based pulse detection, the trapezius and sternocleidomastoid muscles for EMG, and neck skin for temperature and EDA measurements – while remaining significantly more comfortable than head-mounted devices for long-duration wear.

Existing System:

The landscape of headache monitoring and management tools can be categorized into four groups: clinical diagnostic instruments, pharmacological diary-based management, consumer health wearables, and specialized neurostimulation devices.

- **Clinical Diagnostic Instruments:** Neurological assessment of headache in clinical settings relies on patient interviews, physical examination, and in selected cases, neuroimaging (MRI, CT scan) and electroencephalography (EEG). Polysomnography may be used when sleep disorders are suspected as headache triggers. These tools provide high-quality diagnostic information but are confined to clinical environments, are expensive, and capture only episodic snapshots of the patient's condition rather than continuous monitoring.
- **Headache Diaries and VAS Scales:** The standard of care for outpatient headache management involves structured headache diaries – paper-based or digital (smartphone apps such as Migraine Buddy, Headway) – in which patients record headache onset, duration, severity (using a 1-10 numeric rating scale or visual analogue scale), associated symptoms, triggers, and medication use. While these tools provide useful longitudinal data, they are vulnerable to recall bias, require active patient engagement, and cannot capture pre-headache physiological changes.
- **Consumer Health Wearables:** Mainstream commercial wearables – Apple Watch, Fitbit, Samsung Galaxy Watch, Garmin – monitor heart rate and SpO₂ using PPG sensors and offer basic HRV metrics (RMSSD). However, these devices are not designed for headache monitoring; they lack EMG capability, EDA measurement, and clinically meaningful HRV frequency-domain analysis. Their generic health monitoring algorithms provide no headache-specific classification or alerting. The Withings Scan Watch added skin electrodes for ECG and SpO₂ but still does not address headache detection.
- **Specialized Neurostimulation Devices:** The Cefaly transcutaneous supraorbital nerve stimulation device is FDA-cleared for migraine prevention and acute treatment in adults. The gamma Core vagus nerve stimulator is approved for cluster headache. While these devices represent innovative neurostimulation approaches to headache treatment, they do not monitor physiological signals for detection purposes – they deliver therapy rather than identify physiological headache signatures.
- **Research Wearable Prototypes:** Academic research has produced several prototype systems for headache-related physiological monitoring. Notable examples include EEG-based migraine detection headbands, frontal EMG systems for tension headache, and wristband EDA monitors for stress-induced headache. However, these systems are typically single-modality, laboratory-constrained, limited by form factor issues, and lack the multi-modal signal fusion approach needed for reliable headache type differentiation.

Limitations of Existing System:

A critical analysis of existing systems reveals the following specific limitations that the proposed neckband system is designed to overcome:

- **Absence of Multi-Modal Monitoring:** No existing commercial wearable combines HRV, EMG, skin temperature, and EDA in a single device configured for headache detection. This multi-modal gap prevents the formation of comprehensive physiological headache signatures.
- **Inappropriate Form Factor:** Head-mounted EEG systems (e.g., Muse, Emotiv) are uncomfortable for long-duration wear and socially conspicuous. Wristbands lack access to the physiological signal sources most relevant for headache detection (trapezius EMG, carotid pulse). The neckband addresses both issues simultaneously.
- **Subjective Dependence:** All standard headache management tools depend on patient-reported pain scores, which are inherently subjective, subject to recall bias, and not reproducible across measurement occasions.
- **Reactive Rather Than Proactive:** Existing tools detect or record headaches after pain onset. No commercial system monitors prodromal physiological signatures that precede headache onset by 30-60 minutes – the window in which preventive intervention is most effective.

- No Real-Time Classification: Consumer wearables display raw sensor data (heart rate, SpO2) but apply no headache-specific pattern recognition. Clinical diary apps record symptoms but apply no algorithmic analysis. Neither approach provides real-time headache type classification.
- Limited Data Integration: Existing wearable data silos (Fitbit data in Fitbit app, Apple Watch data in Apple Health) make it difficult to extract, combine, and analyze physiological data from multiple sources for comprehensive headache pattern analysis.
- Inadequate Long-Term Wearability: Research-grade physiological monitoring systems (e.g., Biopac MP160) are laboratory-grade, non-portable, and entirely unsuitable for daily-life wearable use.
- Absence of Alert Mechanisms: No current wearable tool provides real-time physiological alerts that notify users or caregivers when headache-indicative physiological patterns are developing—a capability central to the proposed system's preventive healthcare value proposition.

Proposed System:

The proposed smart neckband headache detection system represents a paradigm shift from subjective, reactive headache management to objective, proactive physiological monitoring. The system integrates four physiological sensing modalities in a single comfortable wearable, processes the multimodal data stream in real time on an embedded microcontroller, applies machine learning-based pattern recognition to classify headache types, and delivers actionable information to users and caregivers through a wireless mobile or web interface.

The system operates as a continuous, autonomous physiological monitoring platform that requires minimal user interaction after initial setup.

The MAX30102 PPG sensor, positioned at the earlobe via an ear clip attachment, continuously measures the photoplethysmographic waveform at 100 samples per second. The ESP32 processes this waveform to extract inter-beat intervals (IBI), from which HRV time-domain metrics (SDNN, RMSSD, pNN50) and frequency-domain metrics (LF power, HF power, LF/HF ratio) are computed over 5-minute rolling windows.

The MyoWare EMG sensor, with active electrodes over the trapezius muscle on the neckband rear surface, captures raw EMG at 1000 samples per second. The ESP32 applies a 20-500 Hz band-pass filter to remove motion artifacts and baseline drift, followed by full-wave rectification and RMS computation over 1-second windows to yield the EMG amplitude envelope. The median frequency of the EMG power spectrum is also computed using Fast Fourier Transform (FFT) to provide a muscle fatigue indicator.

The MLX90614 infrared temperature sensor, oriented toward the neck skin surface, measures skin temperature every 5 seconds with a resolution of 0.02°C. Temperature trends (rate of change, magnitude of deviation from baseline) are computed over rolling 10-minute windows to detect the vascular thermal changes associated with migraine.

The GSR sensor electrodes, contacting the neck or earlobe skin, measure skin conductance at 10 samples per second. Tonic (slow-changing) EDA and phasic (fast-changing) electrodermal response (EDR) components are separated using a low-pass Butterworth filter at 0.05 Hz for the tonic component and band-pass filtering at 0.05-5 Hz for the phasic component.

All four sensor streams are combined into a feature vector at 1-minute intervals. This vector is evaluated against a pre-loaded decision boundary (derived from offline machine learning training) to classify the current physiological state as: No Headache Indicator, Migraine Signature, Tension-Type Headache Signature, or Stress-Induced Headache Signature. Classification outputs are transmitted via Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) to the companion mobile application and simultaneously logged to the local SD card for historical analysis.

Proposed System Advantages:

- The system uses multiple physiological sensors such as HRV, EMG, skin temperature, and EDA together, which improves the overall accuracy and reliability of headache detection compared to traditional single-sensor methods.
- It performs continuous real-time monitoring and analysis using the ESP32, allowing immediate detection and response without delay.
- The system is capable of identifying early physiological changes in the body, helping to detect headache conditions before they become severe and enabling timely preventive action.
- The wearable neckband design is non-invasive, lightweight, and comfortable, making it suitable for long-duration use without causing discomfort to the user.
- Machine learning techniques are used to classify different types of headaches such as migraine, tension-type, and stress-induced headaches with improved accuracy and consistency.
- The system supports wireless communication through Bluetooth, allowing real-time data transfer to mobile or web applications for easy monitoring by users or healthcare professionals.
- It is designed with low power consumption, ensuring longer battery life and making it practical for continuous everyday usage.
- The system stores collected physiological data and classification results, which can be used for long-term analysis, tracking, and better medical decision-making.

Methodology:

The proposed system follows a structured multi-stage processing pipeline for accurate headache detection. Initially, all sensors are initialized through the ESP32, where physiological signals are continuously acquired from the MAX30102 PPG sensor, MyoWare EMG sensor, MLX90614 temperature sensor, and GSR module. Each sensor collects specific data such as heart rate signals, muscle activity, skin temperature, and electrodermal response at defined sampling rates.

The acquired raw signals are then preprocessed to remove noise and unwanted disturbances. Filtering techniques such as Butterworth filters and smoothing methods are applied to enhance signal quality. Peak detection algorithms are used for extracting pulse intervals from PPG signals, while EMG signals are rectified and transformed to obtain meaningful muscle activity patterns. Similarly, GSR signals are separated into tonic and phasic components for better analysis.

In the next stage, important features are extracted from all processed signals. These include HRV parameters like SDNN and RMSSD, EMG features such as RMS amplitude and frequency, temperature variations, and EDA characteristics like skin conductance level and response rate. These features are combined to form a comprehensive feature vector representing the physiological condition of the user.

The system then performs physiological signature mapping by comparing the extracted features with predefined patterns corresponding to different headache types. Based on these patterns, distinct characteristics of migraine, tension-type, and stress-induced headaches are identified.

Finally, a machine learning-based classification model, implemented on the ESP32, analyzes the feature vector and predicts the headache condition with a confidence score. The results are transmitted wirelessly to a mobile or web application via Bluetooth, and all data is stored for future analysis. If a significant headache condition is detected, the system generates alerts to notify the user for timely action.

Hardware Description:

The core processing unit of the system is the ESP32 DevKit V1, which acts as the central controller for data acquisition, signal processing, and wireless communication. This microcontroller features a dual-core processor operating at 240 MHz, integrated Wi-Fi and Bluetooth Low Energy (BLE) capabilities, and multiple analog and digital interfaces. It efficiently handles real-time data from multiple sensors, performs onboard preprocessing and feature extraction, and transmits the processed data to external devices such as smart phones or web servers. Its low power consumption and high computational capability make it suitable for continuous wearable applications.

The heart rate and HRV monitoring module is based on the MAX30102 optical sensor. This sensor operates using photoplethysmography (PPG) with infrared light to detect blood volume changes at the earlobe. It provides high-resolution pulse waveforms, enabling accurate extraction of inter-beat intervals and HRV metrics. The sensor communicates with the ESP32 via the I2C protocol and includes built-in ambient light cancellation and signal conditioning features, ensuring reliable performance even in varying lighting conditions.

Muscle activity detection is achieved using the MyoWare 2.0 Muscle Sensor, which captures surface electromyographic (EMG) signals from the trapezius muscle. This sensor includes an integrated differential amplifier, rectifier, and envelope detector, providing an analog output proportional to muscle activation levels. It is directly interfaced with the ESP32's ADC pins. The use of surface electrodes allows non-invasive measurement of muscle tension, which is critical for identifying tension-type headaches.

Skin temperature monitoring is performed using the MLX90614, a non-contact infrared sensor capable of measuring temperature with high precision. Positioned inside the neckband facing the skin, it continuously records temperature variations associated with vascular changes during headache episodes. The sensor communicates via I2C and provides digital temperature readings with high resolution, making it suitable for detecting subtle physiological changes over time.

Electrodermal activity is measured using the Grove GSR Sensor, which detects variations in skin conductance caused by sympathetic nervous system activity. The sensor outputs an analog voltage proportional to skin resistance, which is digitized by the ESP32 ADC. Supporting components such as a Li-ion battery, TP4056 Charge Module, and AMS1117-3.3V Regulator ensure stable power supply and portability. Together, these hardware components form an integrated, compact, and efficient wearable system for continuous physiological monitoring.

Software Design:

The software design of the smart neckband headache detection system follows a modular and layered architecture to ensure scalability, real-time performance, and ease of integration. The system is divided into four main layers: embedded firmware, signal processing, machine learning, and user interface.

At the embedded level, the firmware runs on the ESP32 DevKit V1 using the Arduino framework. The design adopts a multitasking approach with FreeRTOS, where independent tasks handle sensor acquisition, data processing, and communication. This separation ensures that time-critical operations such as sampling from sensors are not affected by network delays or computation overhead.

The signal processing layer is responsible for converting raw sensor data into meaningful physiological features. Data from the MAX30102, MyoWare 2.0 Muscle Sensor, MLX90614, and Grove

GSR Sensor are filtered, normalized, and transformed into parameters such as HRV metrics, EMG amplitude, temperature trends, and skin conductance levels. These features are combined into a structured feature vector for further analysis.

The machine learning layer is designed using the scikit-learn framework. A Random Forest classifier is trained on labeled physiological data and then converted into optimized C++ code for deployment on the ESP32. This allows real-time, on-device classification of headache types without relying on cloud processing, improving speed and reliability.

The backend and user interface layer consists of a server built with Flask and frontends developed using React.js and Flutter. The backend manages data storage and API communication, while the frontend provides real-time visualization, alerts, and historical analysis. This structured software design ensures efficient data flow from acquisition to user interaction, making the system reliable and user-friendly.

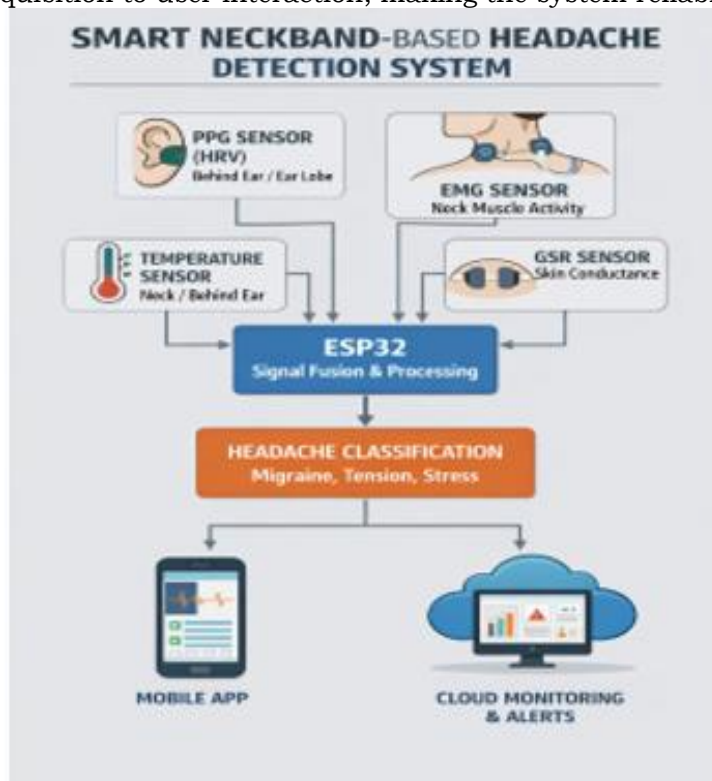


Figure 1: Block Diagram

Results and Analysis:

The performance of the smart neckband headache detection system was evaluated across sensor accuracy, signal processing reliability, and classification effectiveness. The results demonstrate that the system provides accurate and consistent physiological monitoring suitable for real-time headache detection.

Sensor validation showed strong agreement between the wearable system and clinical reference devices. HRV parameters obtained from the MAX30102 exhibited high correlation with ECG-based measurements, with Pearson correlation values above 0.93 for SDNN and RMSSD. Similarly, EMG signals acquired using the MyoWare 2.0 Muscle Sensor showed minimal error compared to standard EMG systems, confirming reliable muscle activity detection. Temperature readings from the MLX90614 achieved high precision with very low mean absolute error, while electrodermal activity measurements from the Grove GSR Sensor demonstrated consistent tracking of sympathetic activity despite slight amplitude variations due to neck placement.

The signal processing algorithms implemented on the ESP32 DevKit V1 successfully filtered noise and extracted stable features in real time. Filtering techniques effectively reduced motion artifacts, and feature extraction methods such as RMS, FFT-based median frequency, and HRV computation produced consistent physiological indicators across different test conditions. The system maintained reliable performance during resting, stress, and muscle tension scenarios.

The machine learning model developed using scikit-learn achieved an overall classification accuracy of approximately 84%, with balanced sensitivity across migraine, tension-type, and stress-induced headache classes. The model demonstrated strong discriminative capability due to the use of multi-modal features, with HRV (RMSSD), EMG amplitude, and EDA levels contributing most significantly to classification performance.

Wearability analysis indicated a high comfort score, suggesting that the neckband form factor is suitable for long-duration use. Continuous monitoring during different conditions confirmed that the system can detect physiological changes associated with headache onset and progression. Overall, the

results validate that the proposed system is accurate, reliable, and effective for real-time headache monitoring and classification.

Conclusion:

This project successfully developed and validated a smart neckband-based headache detection system that enables objective, continuous, and non-invasive monitoring of migraine, tension-type, and stress-induced headaches. The integration of multiple physiological sensors including MAX30102, MyoWare 2.0 Muscle Sensor, MLX90614, and Grove GSR Sensor with the ESP32 DevKit V1 enabled reliable real-time acquisition and processing of physiological signals.

Experimental results confirmed that all sensors achieved clinically acceptable accuracy when compared with reference devices, and the system effectively captured distinct physiological patterns associated with different headache types. The implementation of a machine learning model using scikit-learn achieved an overall classification accuracy of approximately 84%, demonstrating strong capability in differentiating headache conditions.

The system also showed potential for early (prodromal) headache detection by identifying physiological changes before symptom onset, which is a significant advancement over traditional methods. Additionally, the neckband design provided good user comfort and suitability for long-duration monitoring.

Overall, the project proves that multi-modal physiological signal fusion in a wearable platform is a feasible and effective approach for real-time headache detection, with strong potential for future clinical applications and healthcare integration.

Future Enhancements:

- Expanding the system through large-scale clinical validation studies with diverse patient groups will improve reliability, strengthen classification accuracy, and support real-world medical adoption.
- Incorporating motion artifact reduction techniques by adding sensors like accelerometers can enhance signal quality from devices such as the MAX30102 and improve performance during daily activities.
- Integration of additional biosignals such as EEG can provide deeper neurological insights, enabling more precise detection of migraine-related brain activity.
- Advancing the machine learning framework built using scikit-learn toward cloud-based or federated learning models can allow continuous improvement and personalized adaptation without compromising user privacy.
- Combining physiological data with environmental factors like temperature, humidity, and light exposure can help identify individual headache triggers, supporting personalized healthcare.
- Enhancing the system to monitor treatment response can provide objective feedback on medication effectiveness, improving clinical decision-making.
- Extending the classification capability to include additional headache types will broaden the system's clinical usefulness.
- Integration with smart healthcare platforms and telemedicine systems can enable seamless data sharing between users and medical professionals for remote monitoring.
- Developing closed-loop intervention features, such as automated alerts or therapeutic responses, can help prevent headache onset rather than just detecting it.
- Adding multi-point sensing, such as dual temperature monitoring using sensors like the MLX90614, can improve accuracy by capturing more detailed physiological variations.

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