

A New Approach for Monitoring Sweat Ammonia Levels Using a Ventilated Capsule [†]

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[†] Presented at the 8th International Electronic Conference on Sensors and Applications, 1–15 November 2021; Available online: <https://ecsa-8.sciforum.net>.

Abstract: Ammonium levels in sweat can potentially be used to measure muscle fatigue and to diagnose particular metabolic myopathies. To research the potential use of ammonia in sweat as a biomarker, a new real-time monitoring system is developed. This system consists of a capsule that is placed on the skin and ventilated with dry air. A metal-oxide gas sensor in the capsule detects the ammonia that is evaporated from sweat. The sensor system was built, and calibration experiments were performed. The sensors show good sensitivity from 27 mV/ppm to 1.1 mV/ppm in the desired measurement range of 1 to 30 ppm, respectively. A temperature and humidity sensor is integrated to compensate for temperature and humidity effects on the NH₃ sensor.

Keywords: sweat sensor; NH₃ sensor; metal-oxide gas sensor; sweat monitoring



Citation: Steijlen, A.; Bastemeijer, J.; Nederhoff, R.; Jansen, K.; French, P.; Bossche, A. A New Approach for Monitoring Sweat Ammonia Levels Using a Ventilated Capsule. *Eng. Proc.* **2021**, *10*, 38. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ecsa-8-11332>

Academic Editor: Stefano Mariani

Published: 1 November 2021

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1. Introduction

Wearable sweat sensors offer new opportunities for continuously monitoring an athlete's condition unobtrusively. Sweat rate and sweat Na⁺ and Cl[−] concentrations may provide information about an athlete's hydration status and core temperature [1]. Measuring muscle fatigue would be another interesting aspect of monitoring an athlete's health status and monitoring the efficiency of training programs. To find a relationship between muscle fatigue and sweat constituents, more physiological research is required. Although lactate levels in the blood are a well-known indicator of muscle fatigue [2], it is known that lactate is a by-product of sweat gland metabolism as well [3], and no significant relationship between lactate levels in blood and lactate levels in sweat were found in the literature [4]. As an alternative, several researchers highlighted the possibility of using NH₄⁺ in sweat as a potential biomarker for muscle fatigue [5,6]. NH₄⁺ concentrations in sweat are relatively high (between 0.5 and 25 mM [7]). During very intense exercise, adenosine triphosphate (ATP) levels get very low, and inosine monophosphate (IMP) and NH₄⁺ are produced from adenosine monophosphate (AMP). This is part of the purine nucleotide pathway [8] and results in the accumulation of ammonia in the blood, which possibly results in an increase in NH₄⁺ concentrations in sweat during exercise as well. To research if NH₄⁺ levels in sweat are related to blood levels, and if sweat [NH₄⁺] can be used as a biomarker for muscle fatigue, reliable real-time NH₄⁺ monitoring systems are required.

Moreover, monitoring of sweat (NH₄⁺) may have interesting clinical applications. Subjects with particular metabolic myopathies show abnormal concentrations of NH₃ during intense exercise. For example, subjects with myoadenylate deaminase (MAD) deficiency show very low ammonia variations in blood during ischemic exercise [9,10].

In this paper, we present a new way of monitoring NH_4^+ levels in sweat to research the potential of the abovementioned applications. Previous research focused on ionic content measurement using potentiometry [6,11]. Since $\text{NH}_3(\text{aq})$ is evaporating quickly, we propose to measure the NH_3 levels evaporated from sweat in a sensing capsule that is placed on the skin. Controlled airflow through the system is necessary to calculate the concentration in the sweat based on the concentration measured in the sensing capsule. Therefore, the sensor is integrated into a ventilated capsule system, which is commonly used by physiologists for measuring sweat rate [12]. This paper focuses on the design and development of the NH_3 measurement system.

2. Method

2.1. Design

It is estimated that a sensor with a detection range between 0 and 100 ppm is required, by using data about NH_4^+ in sweat found in the literature [7], sweat rate and volumetric flow rate of air through the capsule. Based on measurement range, price, and ability to integrate this sensor in a wearable, the MICS-5914 semiconductor metal oxide gas sensor (SGX Sensortech, Neuchâtel, Switzerland) was selected. This sensor consists of an Si/SiO₂ substrate with 4 gold-platinum electrodes. Two electrodes are used for heating the sensor and two are for performing the measurement. The metal oxide sensing layer including tungsten nano-plates is placed on top [13]. When the sensor is exposed to NH_3 , the resistance across the sensing electrodes will drop. Next to NH_3 , the sensor is sensitive to ethanol, hydrogen, propane and butane. These gases will not be formed during sweating in general conditions. Figure 1 shows a schematic overview of the entire measurement system. We use a series-series feedback circuit to read out the sensors (Figure 2a). This circuit has a linear response, which facilitates calibration. It also reduces noise, distortion, and variations due to temperature influences. The circuit includes the precision operational amplifier LTC2057 (Analog Devices, Norwood, MA, USA) and the MCP3421 (Microchip, Chandler, AZ, USA) analog to digital converter with differential input is used. These electronics with a single NH_3 sensor and a humidity and temperature sensor (HDC1080, Dallas, Texas Instruments) are placed at a small PCB (34 mm × 28 mm), that is designed to fit in a capsule (Figure 2b,c). The capsule can be taped to the skin of the athlete. The sensors are placed inside the capsule and the other supporting electronics of the readout circuit are placed at the other side of the PCB, outside the capsule. The capsule PCB is connected to a shield that contains the current source for the heater circuit, the connection to a power supply and a multiplexer to switch between different capsules. Data of four sensor capsules can be read out with an STM32F411RE microcontroller board (STMicroelectronics, Geneva, Switzerland) (Figure 2d). It was chosen to place the sensors as close as possible to the collection surface, to prevent that NH_3 is absorbed by the materials of the capsule and the tubing before the NH_3 molecules are detected. A thin gold layer was sputtered on the inside of the capsule to prevent absorption in this area. The capsule itself is made of a 3D printed flexible photopolymer (Connex 3, Objet 350, Stratasys, Rehovot, Israel) and has a collection surface diameter of 26 mm. The airtight capsule will be placed at the skin with a double-sided acrylate adhesive (3M 1522, [14]) During the in situ experiments, the capsule can be ventilated with dry air at a flow rate between 0.2 and 1.2 L/min, depending on the type of exercise test that will be performed.

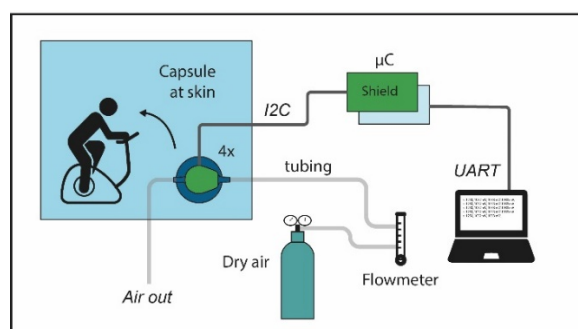


Figure 1. An overview of the sweat NH_3 measurement system. Four capsules with sensors can be read out by the microcontroller. Data can be retrieved through a UART connection.

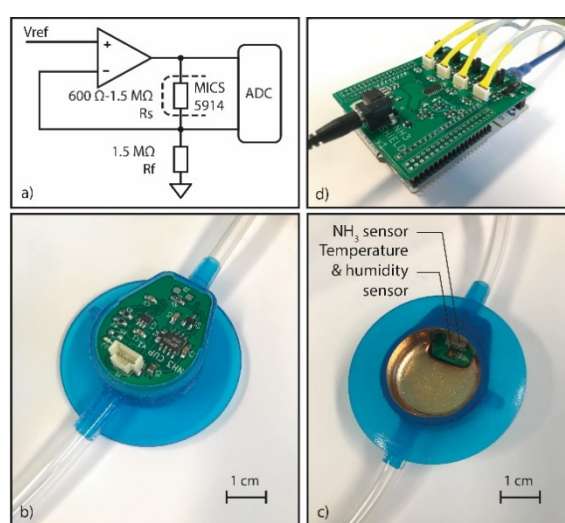


Figure 2. (a) The series–series feedback circuit used to read out the MICS-5914 sensor. (b) Top view of the capsule. (c) Bottom view of the capsule. (d) The shield for reading out 4 capsules.

2.2. Sensor Characterization

Each of the MICS-5914 sensors has different resistance in air and the sensitivity will also differ [15]. Therefore, each individual sensor needs to be calibrated. A calibrated electrochemical NH_3 sensor for air quality monitoring (S900, Aeroqual, Auckland, New Zealand) was purchased to calibrate the sensors. The sensor modules and the reference sensor are placed in a closed box with tubing to an Erlenmeyer flask. The air is circulated with a small fan through the glass and through the box. First, the sensor resistance must stabilize before NH_3 can be measured reliably. Therefore, the sensors are started up 2 h before the measurement. One sensor is covered with aluminum foil, to keep an eye on the effects of temperature and humidity changes. An ammonia solution is made in the Erlenmeyer flask from household ammonia and demineralized water. With this solution, different NH_3 concentration levels can be created in the closed box. Measurements of 30 to 40 min are performed at concentration levels of 3, 5, 10, 20 and 30 ppm NH_3 .

During sweating, humidity levels in the measurement capsule will increase. These humidity changes will influence the NH_3 measurements. To quantify the influence of humidity, the Erlenmeyer flask is removed and beakers with different diameters with water are placed in the setup. In this way, different evaporation surfaces result in different humidity levels in the box.

3. Results and Discussion

Figure 3a shows the raw data of the resistance change of the sensors during the NH_3 experiment. The temperature is 25 °C and the humidity level is 60%. The baseline resistance

highly differs for each sensor (from 360 k Ω to 1140 k Ω). Furthermore, the sensor readings show a transient behavior. In the literature, it was found that metal oxide gas sensors have a fast response time compared to other types of gas sensors [16], and in experiments with ethylene, the MICS-5914 has a sorption and desorption time constant of $\tau_s = 29$ s and $\tau_d = 43$ s [13]. On top of that, the reference sensor shows a very similar transient response (Figure 3b). It is expected that the transient is mainly originating from the rising NH_3 concentration in air, since the NH_3 is evaporating from the flask, and it will take some time before an equilibrium at a certain concentration is reached. The small peaks between each concentration level originate from the moment that we change the flask and box is circulating air from the environment for a few minutes. During this moment, NH_3 and humidity levels will decrease, and sensor resistance will increase. When a new flask with an NH_3 solution is connected, the resistance will immediately decrease again.

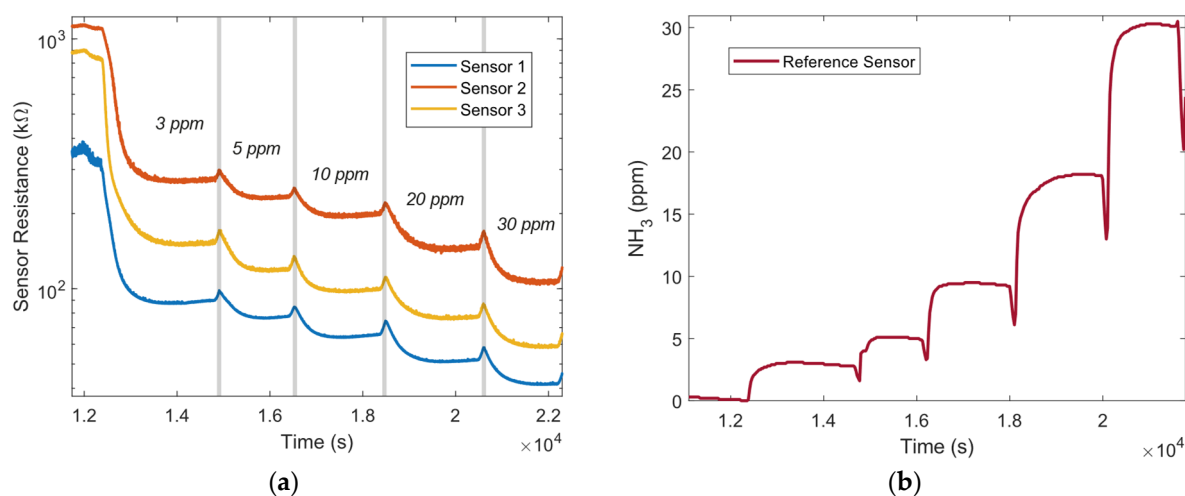


Figure 3. (a) Sensor resistance plotted over time during the calibration experiment. The sensors are exposed to an environment with different concentrations of NH_3 . (b) The reference measurements during the calibration experiment with the calibrated S900 sensor (Aeroqual, New Zealand).

A calibration plot can be made using data from the MICS-5914 sensors (baseline resistance, R_0 and sensor resistance, R_s) and the reference sensor measurements. This calibration plot is shown in Figure 4. A clear difference in sensitivity between sensors can be seen, which emphasizes that each individual sensor needs to be calibrated. In all experiments, it was found that the baseline sensor resistance drifts over time. This drift varies in each measurement. In further experiments, these measurements will be repeated multiple times, to test the stability of the sensors during NH_3 measurements. A sensor with excellent stability would be beneficial if physiologists and clinicians want to know the absolute concentration levels in sweat. However, in studies about the relationship between NH_3 and muscle fatigue, measuring relative changes in NH_3 would already give valuable information.

When exposing the sensor to a changing humidity level from 38% to 50%, a clear drop in resistance, which varies between sensors (from 25% to 60%), can be seen. These changes are comparable to the changes measured by Krivec et al. [13]. Water molecules can be adsorbed at the sensor surface in a similar way as the volatile gas. These molecules reduce the baseline resistance and the sensitivity of the sensor because the available surface area for adsorption of NH_3 molecules decreases. The humidity measurements show the necessity of compensating for humidity influences during sweat NH_3 measurements. A preliminary physiological experiment was executed to research the environmental conditions (temperature and humidity) in the capsule during sweat experiments because sweat rate and skin temperature will influence humidity and temperature conditions. A hydrophobic PTFE membrane was placed between the sensor and the capsule opening, to protect the

sensor against sweat droplets. The method and results can be found in the supplementary information. It was found that in this test, humidity levels increased from 8% to 30%, with increasing sweat rate. In this experiment, a dry airflow rate of 1.2 L/min was used to ensure that all sweat underneath the capsule evaporated. In future experiments, the flow rate needs to be well tuned because a balance needs to be found between having a well detectable $[\text{NH}_3]$ in the capsule and minimizing humidity influences on the sensor resistance. The temperature underneath the capsule ranged between 34.1 °C and 36.3 °C. The varying temperature and humidity conditions confirm that it is important to integrate a temperature and humidity sensor in each capsule.

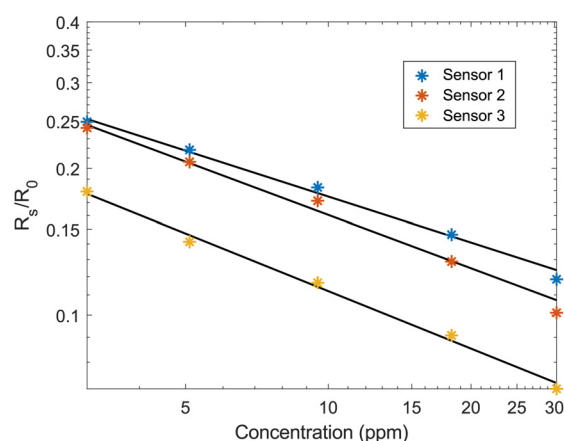


Figure 4. Sensor resistance (R_s) divided by baseline resistance (R_0) plotted against $[\text{NH}_3]$ in ppm measured by the reference sensor. Data were fitted using a power function: $y = a \cdot x^b$.

After quantifying temperature and humidity effects in the expected conditions in the lab, the sensors will be tested in larger physiological experiments in which athletes will perform a high-intensity cycling exercise. In these experiments, we will validate the use of our NH_3 ventilated capsule system for NH_3 sweat measurement. Trends in NH_3 levels in the capsule during exercise at a cycling ergometer will be researched. Based on the insights from these experiments, further improvements to the system will be made.

4. Conclusions

In this research, a new approach to measure NH_3 levels in sweat is presented. A metal-oxide gas sensor is placed in a small ventilated capsule that will be placed on the skin. The sensor measures the NH_3 molecules that evaporate from the sweat. At the same time, humidity and temperature measurements are performed in the capsule. These measurements can be used to compensate for humidity and temperature effects on the metal oxide gas sensor. Calibration experiments showed that the sensors can detect NH_3 levels in the desired range of 3 to 30 ppm. Experiments also showed that humidity changes have a significant effect on baseline resistance. Future experiments should therefore focus on calibrating the sensors at different temperature and humidity levels in the expected range (32–38 °C, 5–60%, respectively). Thereafter, controlled physiological experiments can be executed to measure NH_3 concentrations at the back of an athlete.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/ecsa-8-11332/s1>.

Funding: This work is part of the research program Citius, Altius, and Sanius with project number P16-28, which is financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Delft University of Technology (application ID: 1152, May 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Datasets are available from the corresponding author on request.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank Miguel Thomas for developing the first concept of the system and Adam Schalkers for the design and development of the final capsule PCB and shield PCB.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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