



A Brief Introduction

By Cada McCoy

Until more research on the wild horses' diet emerges, it is very difficult to determine and suggest the perfect domestic equine feed source.

Extrapolating from what horses have evolved to eat...a variety of forage materials...feed producers ranging from major manufacturers to individuals mixing up their own animal's meals...make judgments and selections based on nutritional information resources, such as the National Research Council (NRC) guidelines as well as other variables such as economics and regional availability of feedstuffs.

For a good overview of equine nutrition and feeding options, you may wish to visit www.understanding-horse-nutrition.com/

To help you make the best decisions regarding what to feed, the following are the general categories of feeding choices:

1-Forage Based Diets: The horse's natural feed is forage and should be chosen to meet as much of a horse's protein, energy and fiber needs as possible. Forage types can be combined to provide the best program for each individual horse. Provide between 15 and 30 pounds of forage (1.5-2% of body weight) per day for each horse. Hay, pasture and soil testing should be done to determine if minerals are deficient in the diet and what, if any, supplementation should be added. A laboratory such as Equi-Analytical (www.equi-analytical.com) (see also under "Resources) or your state's agricultural university can provide such testing services. Because general over-farming has reduced nutritional levels of soils, and it is probably impossible in a domestic situation to provide the huge variety of natural forage nutritional sources wild horses consume, attempting to cover all nutrition bases with this basic approach is very challenging and often does not work successfully for most horse owners without the addition of specially formulated minerals and/or a protein source.

2-Commercial feeds (see Feed Options folder – "Feeding Commercial Horse Feed")

3-Protein ration balancers (processed seed meals). Although these products are generally designed to be high in protein and low in carbohydrates, eliminating many of the drawbacks of a carbohydrate-rich, grain-based diet, most of the warnings associated with commercial feeds apply to these ration balancers, also. Soy is generally used as the protein source in these products, and soy's inflammatory and thyroid-inhibiting properties, as well as now being genetically modified (GM), make it a poor choice to add to a horse's diet. Even when other seed meals are substituted for soy (linseed/flax meal, canola meal, etc.), these are considered by-products of the commercial oil extraction industry and, as such, retain contaminants from the solvent extraction process, are frequently GM products and retain the intrinsic anti-nutrient qualities typical of all seeds. For a good explanation of protein's relevance to the equine diet, this article is very helpful: [The Power of Protein](#)



Below photographic evidence on protein deficiency of the author's horse Sam (May 2006) and after supplementing with digestible protein (following pictures).



May, 2006



August, 2006



July, 2009

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4-Raw foods. Again, because economic incentives limit equine nutritional research, much data is extrapolated from other areas/species and applied to our horses. Using human and small animal diet trends, which now frequently incorporate "exotic" feedstuffs, raw food is now being considered for equine use. Raw food devotees insist that a diet consisting mainly of uncooked, unprocessed plant foods leads to better health and less disease. Adopting aspects of human raw food trends, equine raw food advocates note that plant foods in their most natural state – uncooked and unprocessed – are also the most wholesome for the body. Some examples of a raw food approach to feeding equines include using fruits and vegetables (see also "Feeding Vegetables" in the Feed Options folder); sprouted whole foods (www.biostareq.com), and whole seed mixes (www.ferrellhollowfarm.net).



Although raw food faddists (both human and equine) claim that micronutrients in raw foods can be supplied in smaller quantities with greater effect, and this type of program does avoid many of the pitfalls of processed feedstuffs, it is difficult to absolutely confirm that adequate and balanced nutrition can be uniformly obtained from such a diet.

5-Although fed to horses for over 20 years in other parts of the world, one of latest products to be introduced in the US is copra, the white part of the coconut, which has been dried, baked and ground. Providing a balanced supply of protein and energy, it is a totally natural product and is chemical and GMO free. Copra is a unique horse feed because it has low Non Structural Carbohydrate (NSC), and yet has a high digestible energy content. Copra supplies 'cool' energy from coconut oil and fiber from copra meal. Copra has been found to be suitable for most horses and can be fed to maintain normal insulin metabolism. The fatty acids in copra are mainly medium chain triglycerides (MCT) and are saturated. This means they are readily digested, absorbed by the horse and are not prone to rancidity during storage. Lauric acid, the primary fatty acid in coconut oil, is thought to offer some natural antimicrobial actions and benefit gut health. As when relying on basic forage diets, testing should be done to determine overall nutritional deficits in pastures and hay, and a good quality vitamin/mineral supplement should be added to the copra base. More information can be found at www.stanceequine.com.

Shoki - October 15, 2010 (left) vs. October 8, 2011 (right)



Right: Photographic journal of a horse changed from commercial horse feed to CoolStance.

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