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VOLUME 11, ISSUE 2

April/May 2016

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by Tim Kempton, PhD

# COCONUTS

When it comes to feeds for horses, coconut is probably one of the last things you'd think of. But this "cool" new feed is low in non-structural carbohydrates, high in trainable energy and fiber, and makes feeding simple.



**M**any so-called "modern" horse feeding practices are compromising the wellness of our equine companions. A lot of horses are now being underworked and overfed with too-rich pasture and grain concentrates. As a result, they sooner or later often suffer from behavioral and metabolic disorders.

Research has shown that many of these disorders are caused by the overfeeding of sugars and starch (non-structural carbohydrates or NSC). It is suggested that feeds containing more than **15%** NSC can cause increased blood glucose and insulin levels, and that over time the horse can lose sensitivity to insulin, becoming obese and insulin resistant. The NSC content of so-called "cool" feeds varies considerably between available feeds, from **15%** to over **45%**.

Horses are designed to eat little and often. With our busy lifestyles, it is more convenient for us to feed them twice a day. Using grain-based feeds, this can cause massive spikes in both insulin and glucose, contributing to metabolic chaos. These grain-based feeds not only contain high levels of NSC, but feeding them twice daily exacerbates the problem.

## THE CASE FOR COCONUT MEAL

Feeding coconut to your horse may sound like a surprising concept, but coconut oil is a staple food used in a growing number of health conscious

kitchens around the globe. Coconut oil is extracted from the white endosperm (the white flesh) of the coconut, leaving a feed residue called coconut or copra meal.

Coconut meal is unique as it is the only natural, GM-free, low NSC feed high in trainable energy available in the world. Premium quality coconut meal contains approximately **1,630 cal/lb** of digestible energy, **10%** oil, only **11%** NSC, **21%** crude protein, and **15%** crude fiber. It is not a high oil feed; when fed together with medium quality hay, the combined oil intake is less than **7%**. Coconut meal is low in calcium, but that's usually balanced out from the calcium in your hay/pasture, or with an added trace mineral vitamin mix.

### EQUINE APPLICATIONS FOR COCONUT MEAL

Premium quality coconut meal can be a valuable feed for the wellness of most horses. It is fed instead of grain to provide a “cool” trainable energy for your horse. It can recover and maintain topline, and help maintain a shiny coat, mane and tail. Since it is low in NSC, it is used to avoid metabolic disorders associated with feeding high levels of sugar and starch. It is also used for horses that are sensitive to certain feed ingredients in commercial feeds (i.e. grains, feed preservatives, polyunsaturated fatty acids) that cause metabolic disorders and allergic responses. It can be fed wet or dry, which makes it appealing to owners who like to hydrate their horses or feed a warm feed (mash) in cold climates. When coconut meal is soaked in water, it will expand to three times its original volume.

### FEEDING COCONUT MEAL

If you are going to feed coconut meal to your horse, feed one to four pounds per day, depending on his workload, in addition to medium quality grass hay. Take out any grain-based feeds. You can add in trace minerals and vitamins as required. As always, ensure fresh clean water is available at all times. It is a simple program, but when it comes to horses, simple is usually better!

If you want to feed coconut meal wet, add water at a **1:1** ration (one scoop of water to one scoop of coconut meal). More water can be added if the horse requires extra hydration.

*Continued on page 12.*



## Coconut meal as a “SLOW FEED”

Dr. Nerida Richards and I published research on the effects of feeding horses at pasture with approximately 5 pounds a day (fed in two feedings) of three feeds with different NSC content. These feeds included coconut meal (**11%** NSC), a pelleted feed (**25.3%** NSC), and a sweet feed (**33.7%** NSC) (*Animal Feed Science and Technology*, 2015: Vol 11: 100-108).

The pelleted and sweet feeds caused post-feeding spikes in insulin and glucose, and can be classed as “fast feeds”. Spikes in insulin and glucose are a major cause of metabolic chaos in animals.

Coconut meal had no physiologically significant effect on glucose and insulin levels, and can be classed as a “slow feed”. This means coconut meal can be fed twice daily and not contribute to metabolic chaos.



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## WHICH COCONUT MEAL SHOULD I BUY?

Coconuts are grown in tropical countries. Most coconut plantations do not use pesticides or fertilizers, so the coconut meal is totally natural, and chemical and GMO free. Do not use solvent extracted copra meal as it contains solvents and less than **4%** oil. Do not use moldy copra meal.

When selecting a product to feed your horse, look for coconut meal with the following characteristics:

- Tested pesticide and herbicide free
- Tested GM free
- Mechanically extracted
- Contains more than **10%** oil
- NSC < **12%**
- > **20%** protein
- Aflatoxin tested

It may sound nuts to consider feeding coconut to your horse, but it could be worth considering if you want to feed your horse twice a day, and you have concerns about grain feeding, especially if your horse is struggling with insulin resistance, metabolic disorder, allergies, over-excitability, or any one of a number of equine health issues that seem to be on the rise. Many modern-day horsekeeping practices seem to be creating more challenges than they are solving, so it is time to take a look at what nature has to offer! 🌱



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## Understanding medium chain triglycerides

MCTs are medium chain triglycerides (or fatty acids). "Medium" refers to the chain length of the fatty acids. Oils can contain short chain, medium chain, or long chain fatty acids. Most oils are a combination of all three types.

Coconut oil is rich in a MCT called lauric acid, which has powerful antimicrobial effects. In fact, coconut oil is nature's richest source of lauric acid (**50%**), followed by human breast milk (**6%** to **10%**).

Coconut oil is saturated, so does not become rancid. It does not contain Omega-6 fatty acids, which can cause inflammation. Coconut oil is metabolized differently to all other oils – it provides non-glucose ready energy.

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Dr. Tim Kempton is a nutritional biochemist and an equine enthusiast who understands the practical aspects of the effect of a good diet on performance horses. His philosophy is that since horses don't read nutrition books, they can only eat what humans think they need. Horses can tell us if their diet is suitable through their coat, eyes, behavior, performance, and onset of more serious metabolic disorders. Grain based feeds with a high sugar and starch content may be convenient for us, but they are not suitable for horses. Dr. Kempton pioneered the development of equine feeding systems based on the unique benefits of coconut oil. [stanceequine.com](http://stanceequine.com)