

The corporate ladder isn't the only one you've got the power to climb.

Your Better Body FAST!

BY CARRIE ANTON | PHOTOGRAPHY PAUL BUCETA | MODEL VANESSA PIPOLI

Who didn't play hopscotch as a kid?

An adult version, in the form of agility ladder drills, can be an amazing warm-up and lead to better overall coordination, strength, power and movement. Plus, you're guaranteed to have a blast!



DIY ADULT HOPSCOTCH

While you can find speed ladders in most sports equipment stores for a reasonable price, you can do a DIY version with just a piece of chalk. Start by cutting out an 18-by-18-inch square from cardboard or poster board. Trace one square onto a ground surface that can be easily washed, such as your driveway or garage floor. Line up the template with one end of the first traced square, and trace the three remaining sides. Repeat this until you have about 15 feet. (For the mathematically challenged, that's 10 squares!)

TURN THE
PAGE FOR
MORE ▶

PHOTOGRAPH BY CLAUDIO STABILI/WIREIMAGE.COM; TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA

Get Started

THE WHAT

These drills, which are used by Olympic sprinters, professional football players and tennis stars alike, are performed using a speed ladder – a ladder-shaped piece of equipment typically made of plastic and nylon straps that lies flat on the ground. Speed ladders are usually made up of 18-by-18-inch squares, and vary in length from less than eight feet to more than 30 feet. For beginners, a 15-foot ladder is a good place to start.

THE WHY

What's great about agility ladder drills is how adaptable they are to a person's skill level. "I would highly recommend starting off with simple, low-level drills and to gradually get more intense and complex as your confi-

body from your hips and obliques, all the way down to your ankles and toes. For the skilled athlete, these drills help improve performance in acceleration and deceleration, and help in the execution of quick, controlled multi-directional body movements. For newbies, these drills can be a benefit in everyday life – think of your daily routine of walking in heels and juggling your car keys with your morning cup of java, all while opening the car door and holding on to

warm-up twice a week. We've broken them up by skill level, but that doesn't mean a beginner should shy away from the tougher ones, or an elite athlete should balk at the basics. Beginners should take it slow, find a rhythm and then gradually add speed. An elite athlete can use the "Too easy?" tips provided in the more basic drills to warm up. And no matter what level you are, focus on good form.

"The most common mistakes I see are improper foot strikes," says McClenton Benzing. "Many athletes get on their tip toes, when they should be landing on the balls of their feet with no heel touch. Start slow to learn the new motor pattern. Once you have the movement down, have the training intention of making your foot contacts as quick as possible."

dence grows," advises Keysha McClenton Benzing, MS, a strength and conditioning coach and co-owner of CrossFit MadTown in Madison, Wisconsin. "Every athlete needs to warm up prior to training, and I personally feel that it's a good way to get the neuromuscular system fired up."

Katy Sandberg, a doctor of physical therapy in Chicago, Illinois, explains that agility ladder drills train your lower

THE HOW

Add a selection of these drills to your

For a thorough warm-up to any workout, choose six exercises and do each one once, making sure you work both sides when necessary. For a stand-alone workout, beginners should select six exercises and perform them

as a circuit three times in total, trying to get faster with each round. Skilled athletes should do eight exercises in one direction, perform them backwards for the second round, and add speed and aim for accuracy during the third.

"Find a rhythm and then gradually add speed."

YOUR WORKOUT, YOUR WAY

To make a drill easier:

Slow down your steps, and say them out loud as you walk through them. Speed things up as the steps start to sink in.

To make a drill harder:

Reverse it. With the exception of laterals and sprints, you can do most agility drills in reverse. Still too simple? Place the ladder on a small hill and work on an incline.

The idea is to make your movements second nature.

dence grows," advises Keysha McClenton Benzing, MS, a strength and conditioning coach and co-owner of CrossFit MadTown in Madison, Wisconsin. "Every athlete needs to warm up prior to training, and I personally feel that it's a good way to get the neuromuscular system fired up."

Katy Sandberg, a doctor of physical therapy in Chicago, Illinois, explains that agility ladder drills train your lower

LOW

1/high knees

LADDER LEVEL: LOW

STEP TO IT: Combine high-knee running with one footstrike per box. Pump your arms like a runner as you go.

TIP: Work on getting your knees high while keeping your steps light. No stomping!



TOO EASY? Try two steps per box.



Pick up the pace; the amount of time your foot is on the ground should be minimal.

2/ hopscotch

LADDER LEVEL: LOW

STEP TO IT: Perform a single-legged hop into the first box, then straddle the sides of the second box with two feet. Repeat this pattern up the ladder, always performing the single hop on the same foot, then switch to work your opposite side.

TIP: Be sure to land on the balls of your feet and not on your toes.

TOO EASY? Alternate your hopping foot so that you are using both feet in the same drill.

3/ bunny hops

LADDER LEVEL: LOW

STEP TO IT: With your hands alongside your body and elbows bent to 90 degrees, jump into each box two feet at a time with quick, light hops.

TIP: Move your arms in tandem for momentum to keep your hops quick and light.

TOO EASY? Jump facing forward into the first box, land facing the right side in the second box, land backwards in the next box, then end in the fourth box facing the left side. Repeat up the ladder.



4/ single-legged hops

LADDER LEVEL: LOW

STEP TO IT: Jump into each box using the same foot for the entire ladder, then switch legs.

TIP: Work on maintaining your balance as you jump – no leaning to one side!

TOO EASY? Hop sideways, with your working leg leading you up the ladder.



5/ sprints

LADDER LEVEL: LOW

STEP TO IT: Run as you would in a fast sprint, but try to aim to place one foot in each box as you go.

TIP: Gain as much speed as you can while still being careful to place your feet accurately in each box.

TOO EASY? Bring both feet into one box before sprinting into

1/ in-in-out-out steps**LADDER LEVEL: MEDIUM**

STEP TO IT: Step your right foot into the box followed by your left. From the same box, step the right foot to the right of and outside the same box, then follow with the left foot, stepping it outside to the left of the box. Repeat this pattern up the ladder, always leading with the right foot. Repeat the sequence, this time leading with the left foot.

TIP: As silly as it may seem, try repeating "right, left, right, left" or "in, in, out, out" as you move.

2/ in-and-out jumps**LADDER LEVEL: MEDIUM**

STEP TO IT: Jump both feet into the first box, then jump to straddle the same box. Repeat this pattern up the ladder, always moving from inside the box to outside the box.

TIP: Avoid pausing on the outer straddle. Think about making your movements quick.

3/ lateral scissors**LADDER LEVEL: MEDIUM**

STEP TO IT: Facing the right side of the ladder with your right foot in the first box, jump and switch your feet so that your left foot is in the first box and your right foot is outside of it. Jump and switch your feet back and forth, traveling down the right side of the ladder. Repeat on the left side with your left leg leading the way.

TIP: Touch your toe to the inside of the box instead of planting your weight on that foot. Keep the center of gravity over your hips, which should be on the outside of the ladder.

HIGH

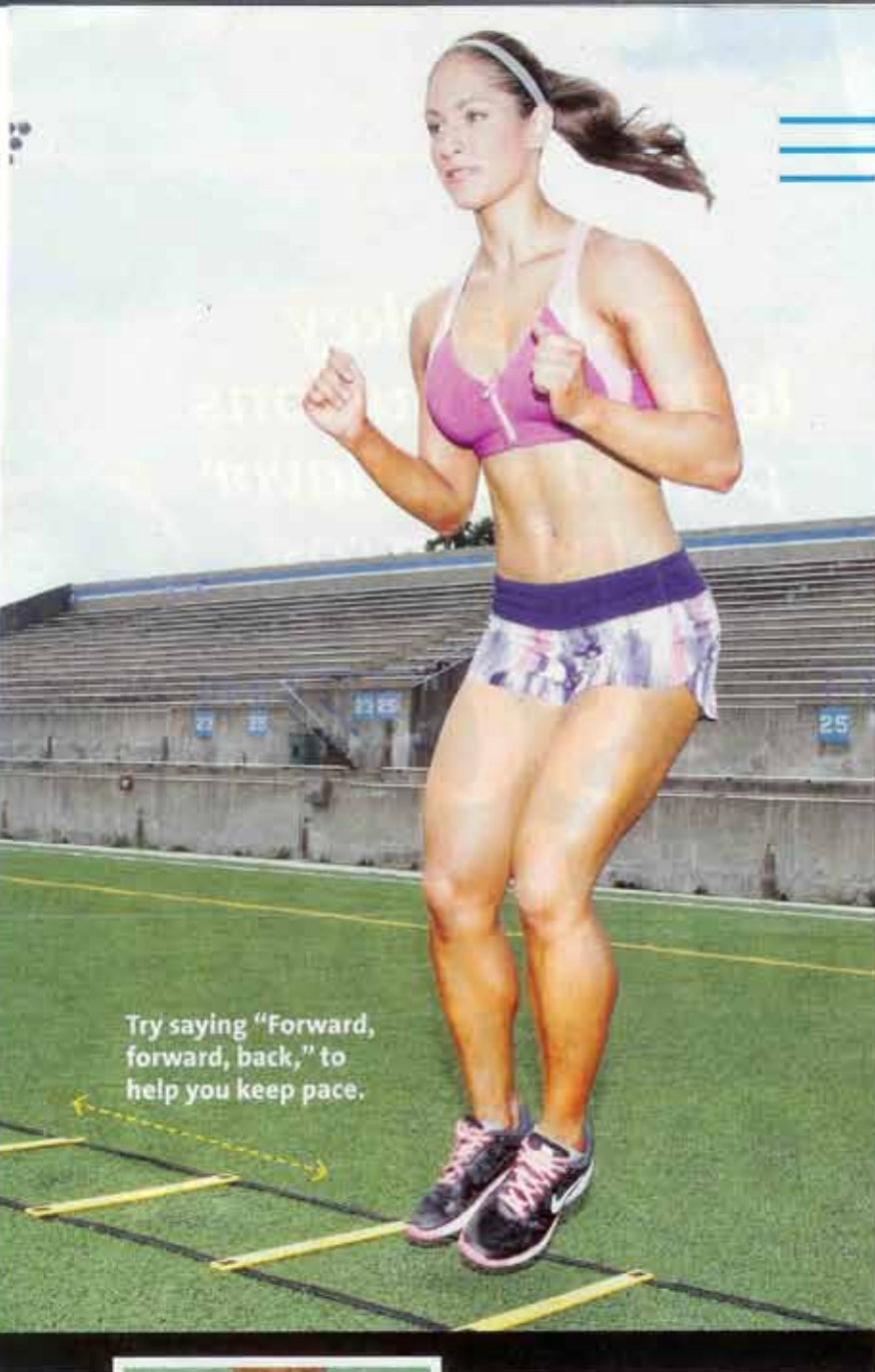
1/ lateral two forward, one back hops**LADDER LEVEL: HIGH**

STEP TO IT: Stand with your right side to the ladder and your feet lined up with the center of the first square. Hop sideways to your right into the first square, then into the second square. Next, hop back to the first square and then back into the second and then the third square. Repeat this pattern, always going two squares forward, one square back. Repeat facing the opposite direction.

TIP: Keep your upper body relaxed – never tense – while trying to be explosive through your lower body.



Start with small lateral motions and work up to one "scissor" per box.



Try saying "Forward, forward, back," to help you keep pace.



2/ rotational twists

LADDER LEVEL: HIGH

STEP TO IT: Facing forward but standing on the left side of the ladder, start with your right foot in the first square and your left foot outside the back corner. Hop and switch your feet so that your left foot is in the second box and your right foot is trailing at the outside corner. Continue, turning your lower body as you go, then switch to the right side of the ladder and repeat.

TIP: Avoid turning your entire body to do this drill. Instead, focus on rotating just at the hips.



3/ ickey shuffle

LADDER LEVEL: HIGH

STEP TO IT: This is a two-in, one-out foot pattern, meaning two feet will enter a square before one moves out. Step into the first square with the left foot, quickly followed by the right foot. As soon as the right foot enters, the left foot should move to the outside of the same square, planting the foot so that the right leg can lead to the next square. Alternate feet as you move up the ladder.

TIP: The key to being quick is staying on the balls of your feet.



4/ moguls

LADDER LEVEL: HIGH

STEP TO IT: Start with your right foot in the center of the first square and your left foot outside the back corner of the same square. Hop and switch your feet so that your left foot is in the center of the second square and your right foot is at the back right corner of that square. Repeat up the ladder, alternating feet as you go.

TIP: This exercise is named after skiers, since they need to transfer weight from one ski to the next when working on bumpy terrain. When working ladder moguls, focus on keeping your center of gravity low and switching your balance from one foot to the other.

No matter what level you are, focus on good form! ■