

# Asteroid could hit Earth

■ **The possible impact with the mile-wide object is still 30 years away.**

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's not time to panic yet, but Earthlings need to keep an eye on a mile-wide asteroid that will zip very close to the Earth in 30 years and could even smash into the planet, causing widespread destruction, astronomers say.

Tentative calculations are that the asteroid, called 1997 XF11, will pass within about 26,000 miles of the Earth's center in October 2028, and experts warn that there is a chance it could actually impact. Such a hit would release energy equal to thousands of atomic bombs.

"It will come extremely close," said Brian Marsden of the International Astronomical Union, which issued an asteroid alert Wednesday. "The chances of impact are very small, but not impossible. We've not had a case like this before."

The IAU has identified 108 asteroids that orbit close enough to Earth to be called "potentially hazardous objects," said Marsden, but astronomers have never seen an object this big moving on a path that would carry it so close to the Earth.

"It is not the kind of situation where people should be worried as yet," said Marsden. "If it was only a few months away, we should be deadly worried. But with 30 years, astronomers will solve the problem."

That might mean a rocket carrying an atomic explosive could be sent to the asteroid and detonated on its rocky surface. This would nudge the asteroid into an orbit that misses Earth.

The asteroid was discovered in December, and repeated observations since have steadily refined the projected orbital path of the speeding space rock. Marsden said his latest calculation was based on photos taken by the University of Texas observatory last week.

News of the Earth-approaching asteroid quickly captured the attention of astronomers.

"This is the first really big one to pass this close," said Jack G. Hills, a

“It will come extremely close. The chances of impact are very small, but not impossible.”

**BRIAN MARSDEN**  
astronomer

Los Alamos National Laboratory asteroid specialist. "This is the most dangerous one we've found so far."

He added: "It scares me. It really does. An object this big hitting the Earth has the potential of killing many, many people."

"It has enormous destructive potential," said Steven Maran of the American Astronomical Society.

Marsden said astronomers may be able to precisely define the risk posed by the asteroid by studying old astronomy photos in which it might appear. If that fails, he said the asteroid will pass within 6 million miles of Earth in 2002, close enough to be tracked by radar.

With that data, he said, the path of the asteroid will be determined to within about 1,000 miles.

Asteroids are routinely observed and plotted by astronomers around the world because of their potential for great destruction on Earth.

An asteroid 6 miles to 10 miles across collided with the Earth about 65 million years ago and is thought to have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs, along with 75 percent of all other species.

Hills said an asteroid the size of 1997 XF11 colliding with the Earth at more than 17,000 mph would explode with an energy of about 320,000 megatons of dynamite. That equals almost 2 million Hiroshima-sized atomic bombs.

Such an asteroid hitting the ocean, Hills said, would create a tidal wave hundreds of feet high, causing extreme flooding along thousands of miles of coastline.

"If one like this hit in the Atlantic Ocean, all of the coastal cities would be scoured by the tsunami," said Hills. "Where cities stood, there would be only mudflats."

If such an asteroid hit land, he said,


it would instantly dig a crater 20 miles across and clog the sky with dust and vapor so thick that the sun would be darkened "for weeks, if not months."

Marsden said his calculations of the asteroid's path have a margin of error of about 180,000 miles, plus or minus, but he believes a pass within 30,000 miles of the Earth's center was the most likely, based on the current observations. He said the closest approach would come at about 1:30 p.m. EST on Oct. 26, 2028.

He said it is "almost a certainty" that the space rock will speed by inside the orbit of the moon, which is about 250,000 miles away. Since Europe will be in darkness as the asteroid speeds by, Marsden said "it should be a splendid sight!"

The asteroid is in an independent orbit of the sun and swings past the Earth's orbit about every two years. It is now passing toward the sun's horizon and will be out of view soon. Marsden said the asteroid will be only faintly seen in 2000, but on Halloween 2002 it should be easily viewed with "quite modest telescopes."

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