

Giant Asteroid

Could Hit Earth

In 2014

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<http://edition.cnn.com/2003/TECH/space/09/02/asteroid.reut/index.html>

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LONDON, England (Reuters) -- A giant asteroid is heading for Earth and could hit in 2014, U.S. astronomers have warned British space monitors.

But for those fearing Armageddon, don't be alarmed -- the chances of a catastrophic collision are just one in 909,000.

Asteroid "2003 QQ47" will be closely monitored over the next two months. Its potential strike date is March 21, 2014, but astronomers say that any risk of impact is likely to decrease as further data is gathered.

On impact, it could have the effect of 20 million Hiroshima atomic bombs, a spokesman for the British government's Near Earth Object Information Centre told BBC radio.

The Centre issued the warning about the asteroid after the giant rock was first observed in New Mexico by the Lincoln Near Earth Asteroid Research Program.

"The Near Earth Object will be observable from Earth for the next two months and astronomers will continue to track it over this period," said Dr Alan Fitzsimmons, one of the expert team advising the Centre.

Asteroids such as 2003 QQ47 are chunks of rock left over from the formation of the solar system 4.5 billion years ago. Most are kept at a safe distance from the Earth in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter.

But the gravitational influence of giant planets such as Jupiter can nudge asteroids out of these safe orbits and send them plunging towards Earth.

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Postscript

The following announcement is from NASA:

Asteroid 2003 QQ47's Potential Earth Impact in 2014 Ruled Out

Paul W. Chodas and Steven R. Chesley
NASA's Near Earth Object Program Office
September 3, 2003

Newly discovered asteroid 2003 QQ47 has received considerable media attention over the last few days because it had a small chance of colliding with the Earth in the year 2014 and was rated a "1" on the Torino impact hazard scale, which goes from 0 to 10. The odds of collision in 2014, as estimated by JPL's Sentry impact monitoring system, peaked at 1 chance in 250,000, a result which was posted on our Impact Risk Page on Saturday, August 30. Impact events at the Torino Scale 1 level certainly merit careful monitoring by astronomers, but these events do not warrant public concern. In fact, each year several newly discovered asteroids reach Torino Scale 1 for a brief period after discovery; 2003 QQ47 is the fourth such case this year.

As astronomers continue to monitor an asteroid and measure its position, more precise predictions can be made. On September 2, new measurements of QQ47's position allowed us to narrow our prediction of its path in 2014, and thus we could rule out any Earth impact possibilities for 2014. In our Impact Risk Page for 2003 QQ47, the entry for the year 2014 has now disappeared, although a number of potential impact events remain for later years. We expect that these too will be ruled out in the coming days as astronomers continue to track the object and we refine our orbit predictions.

These seemingly large day-to-day changes in impact predictions for newly discovered asteroids are just what we expect. In the few days after an asteroid is first discovered, its orbit is known only very approximately. The range of possible positions in future years is wide and can easily encompass the Earth, but as the object continues to be tracked, the range of possibilities shrinks quickly, allowing us to rule out any possibility of impact. This process is ongoing for 2003 QQ47, and could take days or even weeks before all potential impacts are ruled out.

[So there you have it... we can now all rest easy.]

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