

NASA hopes for nighttime Discovery launch

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NASA officials in Washington said they hope to launch the shuttle Discovery after dark, the first nighttime launch since the Columbia explosion.

If shuttle managers give the go-ahead, Discovery will launch after dark Dec. 7 on a 12-day mission to the International Space Station.

Launching at night limits the view of airborne debris, which can hit the ship as it lifts off. While the National Aeronautics and Space Administration has more than 100 cameras near the launch pad in Florida and on the spacecraft to monitor liftoff, they won't work as well in the dark, USA Today said.

Since the fatal Columbia accident in 2003, shuttle astronauts have been required to inspect the ship with sensors once they reach orbit. The sensors can detect cracks as tiny as 0.02 inches long, so the crews should be able to see damage and take the appropriate action. The sensors can't detect near-misses, though.

Shuttle Program Manager Wayne Hale said he and other NASA managers want to resume night launches to ease scheduling for the shuttle, which will be retired in 2010, meaning space station construction must be done by then as well, USA Today said.

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