

# NASA: Nicks on shuttle don't appear to be serious

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Space Shuttle Atlantis lifts-off at the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canveral, Fla, on Monday, May 11, 2009. Space Shuttle Atlantis' seven-member crew are on a final mission to service the Hubble Space Telescope. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

(AP) -- The Atlantis astronauts uncovered a 21-inch stretch of nicks on their space shuttle Tuesday, but NASA said the damage did not appear to be serious.

The damage was likely the result of debris that came off the [fuel tank](#) shortly after liftoff Monday. The [astronauts](#) were inspecting their ship while racing to the [Hubble Space Telescope](#) when they came across the nicks spread over four to five thermal tiles, on the bottom of the shuttle

where the right wing joins the fuselage.

"It doesn't look very serious," Mission Control said. "Those tiles are pretty thick. The nicks look to be pretty small."

This repair mission is especially risky - a rescue shuttle is on standby for the first time ever - because of the debris-littered orbit of Hubble. Unlike other space flights, the astronauts can't reach the [international space station](#) because it is in a different orbit than the telescope.

"Again, right now, everybody's feeling pretty good that it's not something particularly serious," Mission Control told the astronauts. "We just want to make sure we do the right thing and complete all the analysis."

The debris strike was detected in [launch](#) images as well as sensors embedded in the wings.

Damage to the shuttle during liftoff has been a worry for NASA since Columbia was doomed by a chunk of fuel-tank insulating foam that broke off during launch in 2003. Columbia's left wing was punctured, along a vulnerable edge. The nicks on Atlantis are in a less sensitive location.

Flight director Tony Ceccacci told reporters "it's too early to tell" whether the astronauts will need to conduct a more detailed inspection of that area. Any additional survey, to determine the depth of the nicks, would be done Friday right before the second of five spacewalks planned for Hubble.

Even before damage was discovered, NASA was preparing [shuttle Endeavour](#) to rush to the astronauts' rescue if needed. Nothing so far has been found that would require a rescue.

Atlantis will catch up with the 19-year-old Hubble on Wednesday. The astronauts will capture the aging observatory and, the next day, begin the first of five grueling spacewalks to install new cameras and equipment and repair some broken science instruments.

Meanwhile, Atlantis' launch pad took more of a beating than usual during Monday's launch. The heat-resistant material that covers the bricks beneath the pad was blasted off an approximate 25-square-foot area. Some nitrogen gas and pressurized air lines also were damaged.

The damage to the bricked flame trench - which deflect the flames at booster rocket ignition - was near a previously repaired spot but not an area severely battered last year. Monday's damage was not as bad, said NASA spokesman Allard Beutel.

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On the Net:

NASA: <http://www.nasa.gov/mission-pages/hubble/main/index.html>

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