

NASA analyzing junk that could threaten astronauts

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An image taken from NASA video shows spacewalker Nicole Stott working outside the International Space Station during the first spacewalk of the STS-128 mission Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2009. (AP Photo/ NASA TV)

(AP) -- A piece of space junk was drifting toward the shuttle-station complex and its 13 astronauts Wednesday, though NASA officials said the threat would not delay an upcoming spacewalk.

Mission Control was keeping close tabs on the piece of European rocket because there is a chance, however unlikely, it could come too close or even hit the linked [space shuttle Discovery](#) and [international space station](#) if their path is not altered.

Right now, the debris is expected to pass within seven miles of the

outpost on Friday, "a fairly healthy" miss distance, said Mission Control commentator Rob Navias.

"I would emphasize that it is only a remote possibility that we would have to ... steer clear of this piece," Navias said.

Experts will continue to track the debris - part of a 3-year-old [Ariane 5 rocket](#) - to make sure it stays at a safe distance. Pieces of uncontrolled [space junk](#) sometimes stray from their orbit, however, and that is the concern. The object's oval-shaped orbit - stretching as far out as 20,000 miles - made it especially difficult to monitor.

The late-breaking news did not affect the work of the two crews aboard the complex. They moved more cargo into the space station and even installed some of the new big-ticket items, including a sleeping compartment.

If Mission Control determines the shuttle-station complex needs to dodge the junk, that move into a higher orbit would not happen until after Thursday night's [spacewalk](#). The joined spacecraft currently are flying about 220 miles above the planet.

A final decision was not expected until Thursday.

The astronauts performed the first of three planned spacewalks Tuesday, removing an old ammonia tank from the space station. On Thursday, two spacewalkers will install a new, fully loaded tank to replenish the cooling system of the outpost.

Discovery will remain at the space station until Tuesday.

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