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ROCK ALERT!

4,700 Potentially Dangerous Asteroids Lurk Near Earth, NASA Says

This image shows the difference in the orbits of a typical near-Earth asteroid (blue) and a potentially hazardous asteroid, or PHA (orange)A new NASA survey by the WISE telescope has pinned down the number of asteroids that could pose a collision threat to Earth in what scientists say is the best estimate yet of the potentially dangerous space rocks.

The survey found there are likely 4,700 potentially hazardous asteroids, plus or minus 1,500 space rocks, that are larger than 330 feet (100 meters) wide and in orbits that occasionally bring them close enough to Earth to pose a concern, researchers said. To date, only about 30 percent of those objects have actually been found, they added. Potentially hazardous asteroids, or PHAs in NASA-speak, are space rocks in orbits that come within 5 million

miles (8 million kilometers) of Earth and are large enough to cause damage on regional or global scale if they were ever to hit our planet. According to the survey, about twice as many asteroids are in so-called "lower-inclination orbits" - which are more closely aligned with Earth's path around the sun than other objects — than previously thought researchers said.

"A possible explanation is that many of the PHAs may have originated from a collision between two asteroids in the main belt lying between Mars and Jupiter," NASA officials explained in a statement. "A larger body with a low-inclination orbit may have broken up in the main belt, causing some of the fragments to drift into orbits closer to Farth and eventually become PHAs."

"Because they will tend to make more close approaches to Earth,



these targets can provide the best opportunities for the next generation of human and robotic exploration." During its asteroid hunt, the WISE telescope searched for space rocks within about120 million miles (195 million km) of the sun. For comparison, the Earth is about 93 million

miles (150 million km) from the sun. The data from NEOWISE, when combined with other asteroid data observations, helped NASA announce in 2010 that about 90 percent of the largest near-Earth asteroids that come close to our planet had been identified.

shows the difference in the orbits of a typical near-Earth asteroid

(blue) and a potentially

hazardous

asteroid. or