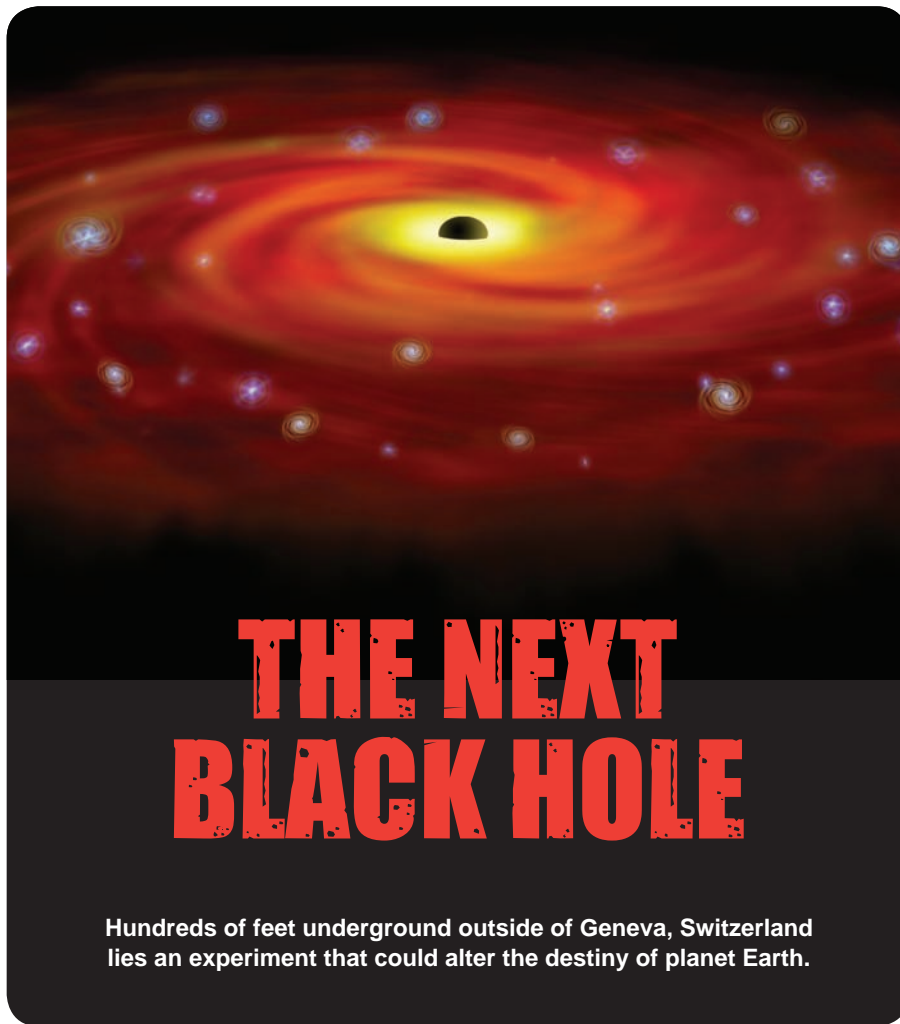


Photo Courtesy of AP Photos



# THE NEXT BLACK HOLE

**Hundreds of feet underground outside of Geneva, Switzerland lies an experiment that could alter the destiny of planet Earth.**

**P**hysicists from around the globe are working feverishly to recreate the moments following the Big Bang.

They are tweaking protons and neutrons, and breaking down atoms beyond the smallest known matter, all in an effort to learn more about how the universe was created.

It's an explosive experiment that allows scientists to play the role of God. And an experiment that has the scientific community deeply divided.

A gargantuan instrument, called a Large Hadron Collider, or LHC for short, is at the center of this controversial and fiery debate. The machine is buried in a 17-mile tunnel along the France-Switzerland border. Scientists with the European Center for Nuclear Research, also known as CERN, have already spent 14 years and \$8 billion building it.

But Walter Wagner, a physicist, biologist, and former nuclear safety officer, is worried. Unlike most experiments, if anything goes wrong with this one, it could mean the end of humanity

That's why he's on a mission to stop it.

"The risk here is the destruction of the entire planet," Wagner said. "It doesn't advance our knowledge with space exploration, or biology or chemistry. It doesn't give us bigger telescopes. It only advances us in one little area and it may or may not even advance us, where as we are facing a risk that is tremendous."

The physicists at CERN are attempting to collide two beams of subatomic particles, protons or lead ions, from opposite directions. If the experiment goes as planned, the particles taken from the atoms will collide at approximately the speed of light; a collision that would release an enormous amount of energy into the CERN laboratory.

That amount of explosive force is discharged into our atmosphere everyday through cosmic rays, but it is spread out across the planet, not detonated inside an enclosed lab. No scientist can say with absolute certainty

what will happen once these atoms are intentionally smashed, but the physicists at CERN don't seem concerned.

Critics of this project speculate many worst-case scenarios playing out at the CERN laboratory. Wagner, among others, fears this experiment could create a mini-black hole that would swallow up planet Earth. They say it could also create something called a "strangelet," which would turn our planet into a sizzling hot pile of "strange matter." In another worst-case scenario, Wagner says the experiment could leave behind toxic waste or even create a pocket of radiation around the Earth. Any of these situations could spell the end of the world, and possibly even the universe.

"They are changing atoms in a way we've never done before," Wagner said. "We've added more neutrons and protons. We've split atoms, but this would be a different kind of transportation."

In March, Wagner filed a federal lawsuit against CERN, the Department of Energy and the National Science Foundation, all of whom are participating in this international project. The lawsuit is intended to force CERN to produce a safety report and an environmental assessment of the project.

Scientists with CERN insist their research is safe. They frequently cite a 2003 report from the CERN laboratory, which found the biggest experiment in particle physics, poses no "conceivable threat" to mankind. A follow-up report earlier this year also concluded that the LHC presented no danger.

"With this report, the laboratory has fulfilled every safety and environmental evaluation necessary to ensure safe operation of this exciting new research facility," Robert Aymar, the director-general of CERN, said in a statement.

But Wagner isn't buying it. He says their safety report was conducted by people who have a stake in the project. He insists no scientist or physicist can say with 100 percent certainty that a strangelet, mini-black hole, or pocket of radiation won't result from this project.

This Wednesday the LHC will be tested and we'll learn who's right and who's wrong. But then again, if any of Wagner's theories come to fruition, we won't be around to realize it. 