The Chlorine Tab in the Skimmer Myth:

What the Pool Industry Gets Wrong — And What the Science Actually Says

By Rex Bowden | | Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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About the Author

Rex Bowden is a pool service professional serving the Baton Rouge, Louisiana area. This analysis was developed through systematic application of chemistry principles, fluid dynamics, dilution mathematics, and review of publicly available manufacturer technical documentation.

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Introduction

If you have spent any time in the pool service industry you have heard it repeated like gospel: never put chlorine tablets in the skimmer. It will void your warranty. It will destroy your heater. It will corrode your equipment. Pool professionals repeat it. Manufacturers warn against it. Online forums treat it as settled science.

But is it actually true?

After applying basic chemistry, fluid dynamics, dilution math, and a systematic review of actual manufacturer technical documentation to this widely accepted rule, the answer is far more nuanced than the industry admits. In fact, several of the most repeated claims about chlorine tabs in skimmers do not hold up under analytical scrutiny — and one of the most alarming conclusions is that the industry's recommended alternative, the inline chlorinator, may actually pose more risk to the very component the industry is most concerned about: the pool heater.

Perhaps most damning of all, Pentair's own technical documentation reveals that their recommended chlorinator product produces documented corrosive backflow of both

liquid and gas — and they make the only protective measure against it an optional accessory rather than a required installation component.

This article examines the evidence on all sides, applies real world math to the risk claims, and arrives at a more honest and defensible conclusion than the pool industry currently offers.

Section 1: What the Industry Claims

The standard pool industry position on chlorine tabs in the skimmer can be summarized in four claims:

- Trichlor tablets have a pH of 2.8, making them highly acidic when concentrated
- When the pump shuts off, concentrated chlorine water sits in the skimmer pipe and becomes dangerously acidic
- When the pump restarts, this acidic water travels through equipment causing corrosion and damage
- The heater heat exchanger is the component most at risk from this chemical exposure

These claims are repeated across manufacturer documentation, pool service training materials, online forums, and professional trade publications. They are treated as established fact. But when each claim is examined individually against basic chemistry, physics principles, and actual engineering documentation, a very different picture emerges.

Section 2: Who Is Actually Making These Claims

Before examining the chemistry, it is worth asking a fundamental question: who exactly is warning against chlorine tabs in the skimmer, and do they have a financial interest in the outcome?

Source	Their Warning	Financial Interest
In The Swim (pool retailer)	Strong warning — claims tabs destroy equipment	Sells floaters and chlorinators
Leslie's Pool Supply (retailer)	Explicit warning on product labels	Sells floaters and chlorinators
Sustain Pool Chemicals (manufacturer)	Confirms equipment damage risk	Sells alternative chemical systems

Source	Their Warning	Financial Interest
Blue Square Manufacturing	Warns against skimmer placement	Sells in-floor cleaning systems
Pool podcasts and YouTube channels	Strongly repeat the warning	Sponsored by equipment companies
Pentair engineering documentation	Silent — no specific technical bulletin on skimmer tabs	Sells replacement equipment
Hayward engineering documentation	Silent — no specific technical bulletin on skimmer tabs	Sells replacement equipment
Peer reviewed academic research	No study specifically on residential skimmer tabs	None

The pattern is clear: every source warning against skimmer tabs has a direct financial interest in selling an alternative product. More significantly, the actual pool equipment engineers at Pentair and Hayward — the companies whose equipment is allegedly being destroyed — have published no specific technical bulletins identifying skimmer tabs as a cause of equipment failure.

If trichlor tabs in skimmers were definitively destroying equipment at the rate the industry claims, Pentair and Hayward engineering teams would have published failure analysis data. That documentation does not publicly exist.

Section 3: The Chemistry — What Is Actually Happening

Trichlor pH and Concentration

It is true that trichlor tablets have a pH of approximately 2.8 in concentrated form — highly acidic by any measure. It is also true that when a tab sits in stagnant water in the skimmer pipe with the pump off, it continues to dissolve and can lower the pH of that isolated water volume significantly.

One pool chemistry analysis calculated that after approximately 16 hours of pump-off time, the pH in a typical skimmer pipe could drop to around 4.0 — the acidity level of black coffee or tomato juice. This is a meaningful drop from normal pool pH of 7.2 to 7.6 and represents genuinely aggressive water chemistry in that isolated pipe volume.

So far, the industry claim appears supported. But this is where the analysis gets more interesting.

The Skimmer Is Not a Sealed Container

The fundamental assumption underlying the skimmer tab warning is that the concentrated chlorine water sits in isolation, building up in concentration without dilution. This assumption is only partially correct.

A pool skimmer is open to the pool at the waterline through the skimmer opening. It is not a hermetically sealed chamber. Normal pool water movement — wind, wave action, thermal convection, and swimmer activity — continuously exchanges water between the skimmer basket area and the pool. This means the concentrated chlorine water in the skimmer basket itself is subject to ongoing dilution from pool water movement.

The only truly isolated section where concentration can genuinely build up is the pipe below the skimmer leading to the pump. This section is effectively sealed when the pump is off, with water unable to backflow easily due to the pump impeller's resistance. This is the section where the pH drop to 4.0 actually occurs — not in the skimmer basket area where tabs typically sit.

Chlorine Chemistry — Dissolving vs. Settling

Another important consideration is how chlorine compounds behave in water. Trichlor dissolves fully into pool water — it does not settle to the bottom like sediment or concentrate in one area without mixing. The resulting chlorine compounds are fully miscible with water, meaning they distribute evenly throughout the water column.

While highly concentrated chlorine solution is very slightly denser than pool water, this density difference is minimal and easily overcome by any normal water movement. The idea that concentrated acidic water from skimmer tabs remains in isolated pockets throughout the equipment system is not supported by the actual chemistry of how these compounds behave in solution.

PVC Pipe — The Most Resistant Material in the System

Peer reviewed materials science research provides another important data point: PVC pipe — the primary material used throughout pool plumbing — is extraordinarily resistant to chlorine damage.

One study testing PVC against chlorine concentrations of 2%, 5%, 25%, 50%, and 100% over three months found that PVC demonstrated the most stable behavior of all plastic pipe materials tested. At residential pool concentrations, which fall well below even the lowest test concentration, PVC showed essentially no meaningful degradation.

CPVC — a variant used in some pool applications — has a documented 50-year service history in hot chlorinated drinking water systems, a far more demanding environment than a residential pool. In practical terms, the PVC plumbing between the skimmer and the pump is not at meaningful risk from chlorine at any realistic pool concentration.

Section 4: The Dilution Math — Tracing the Risk Through the System

The most important analytical tool for evaluating the skimmer tab warning is basic dilution math. When the pump starts and pulls that concentrated acidic water from the skimmer pipe, what actually happens to it as it travels through the equipment?

Consider a typical residential pool system with the following approximate water volumes:

Location	Water Volume	Cumulative Dilution	Approx. pH at This Point
Skimmer pipe — where concentration occurs	8-12 gallons	1:1 — full concentration	~4.0
Pump basket and housing	+2 gallons	Minimal dilution	~3.9
Filter tank	+50-100 gallons	Significant dilution begins	~6.5-7.0
Heater	+5 gallons	Already well diluted	~7.0-7.2
Return lines and jets	+5 gallons	Further diluted	~7.1-7.3
Pool	+15,000-20,000 gallons	Fully diluted	Normal pool pH

The data reveals a critical insight that the pool industry consistently overlooks: by the time the concentrated acidic water from the skimmer pipe reaches the heater, it has already passed through the filter, which contains 50 to 100 gallons of water. The dilution factor at the heater is dramatically higher than at the pump.

The pump and its components — the impeller, shaft seal, and pump housing — receive the concentrated water at or near full strength. The heater receives water that has already been diluted through the entire filter volume.

Yet the industry's primary warning is about heater damage, not pump damage. This is analytically inconsistent with the actual chemistry of what happens in the system.

Section 5: The Inline Chlorinator Problem — Including Pentair's Own Admission

The pool industry's recommended alternative to putting tabs in the skimmer is the inline chlorinator. But when the plumbing sequence is examined alongside Pentair's own technical documentation, a significant and largely unacknowledged problem emerges.

Standard Pool Equipment Plumbing Order

- Skimmer and main drain
- Pump
- Filter
- Heater
- Inline chlorinator / chlorine tower
- Return jets

The inline chlorinator sits after the heater in this sequence. It holds the same trichlor solution at the same pH of 2.8. And when the pump shuts off, the risk of backflow exists.

Pentair's Own Documentation — The Critical Admission

Pentair's installation guide for their Model 320 chlorinator contains a statement that the industry has largely ignored: installation of the optional corrosion resistant check valve will prevent the backflow of corrosive liquids and gases that can damage equipment containing metallic components.

This single statement from Pentair's own technical documentation is extraordinarily significant for four reasons:

- Pentair explicitly calls the check valve OPTIONAL — not required — meaning countless installations lack this protection entirely
- Pentair openly acknowledges their own chlorinator product produces corrosive backflow of both liquid AND gas
- Pentair acknowledges this backflow can damage metallic equipment — the very heater heat exchangers that warranty claims are denied over
- Despite this known risk, Pentair makes the only protective measure an optional add-on rather than a standard installation requirement

A manufacturer that openly acknowledges their own recommended product creates corrosive backflow while simultaneously denying warranty claims for 'chemical damage' — without publishing any engineering data proving skimmer tabs specifically are the cause — has a significant credibility problem in this debate.

The Chlorinator Draining Problem — Gas Formation

An additional risk unique to inline chlorinators that does not exist with skimmer tabs is the formation of chlorine gas during the pump-off cycle.

When an inline chlorinator is installed above the pool water level — a common installation scenario — the water drains out of the unit when the pump shuts off. The trichlor tabs are now sitting in air rather than water. In this state tabs do not dissolve into liquid chlorine but instead release chlorine gas directly. This gas can travel through the plumbing system regardless of check valve condition since most check valves are designed to stop liquid, not gas.

This gas exposure risk is completely absent from the skimmer tab scenario. A tab dissolving in the water-filled skimmer pipe produces concentrated liquid chlorine — not gas. The chlorinator gas risk represents an additional failure mode that the industry's recommended alternative creates but skimmer tabs do not.

Check Valve Degradation — The Gradual Failure Problem

Even when a check valve is properly installed, it does not maintain full effectiveness indefinitely. Research into check valve degradation reveals a progressive failure pattern that is arguably more dangerous than sudden complete failure:

- New check valve: Full seal with zero backflow
- 6-12 months: Seals begin wearing from chemical and thermal exposure — minor seepage begins
- 1-2 years: Progressive seal degradation — increasing backflow with no visible symptoms
- 2-3 years: Significant leakage — possible equipment discoloration begins
- Complete failure: Obvious damage — too late

The gradual degradation scenario is the most dangerous because it delivers small but increasing doses of concentrated chlorine directly to the heater heat exchanger every pump shutdown cycle — over months and years — with no warning signs until significant damage has already accumulated. The manufacturer then inspects the failed heat exchanger, finds copper corrosion, and cites 'chemical damage' to deny the warranty claim without ever examining the check valve condition.

Critically, the rubber gasket materials commonly used in check valves — nitrile and neoprene — are not fully compatible with concentrated trichlor solution. Only Viton fluorocarbon provides adequate chemical resistance, and most inexpensive check valves do not use it. Heat accelerates this degradation further — equipment pad temperatures in Louisiana summer significantly shorten check valve service life.

Comparing the Actual Risk to the Heater

Scenario	Dilution Before Heater	pH at Heater	Gas Risk	Risk Level
Skimmer tabs — pump runs 24/7	Constant dilution through system	Normal pool pH	None	Low

Scenario	Dilution Before Heater	pH at Heater	Gas Risk	Risk Level
Skimmer tabs — timer pump	50-100x dilution through filter	Near normal pool pH	None	Low to moderate
Chlorinator — functioning check valve	Downstream of heater — no direct contact	N/A	Possible gas seepage	Low if properly installed
Chlorinator — degrading check valve	Zero dilution — direct contact increasing over time	Approaching 2.8	Yes — through and around valve	High — and growing
Chlorinator — failed check valve	Zero dilution — full direct contact	~2.8 full concentration	Yes — unrestricted	Very high
Chronic low pool pH	Fully mixed — whole pool volume	Whatever pool pH is	None	Moderate — ongoing

The conclusion from this comparison is striking: the industry's recommended safe alternative delivers far more concentrated acidic exposure to the heater — both as liquid and gas — than skimmer tabs ever could, especially as the check valve ages and degrades over time.

Section 6: What Is Actually at Risk from Skimmer Tabs

Based on the dilution analysis and materials science research, the actual risk profile from putting chlorine tabs in the skimmer with a timer-controlled pump is much more specific than the industry suggests:

Highest Risk — Pump Shaft Seal

The shaft seal is the component where the motor shaft meets the wet end of the pump. It is made of carbon, ceramic, and rubber — all of which are susceptible to concentrated chlorine and low pH exposure. The shaft seal is the first internal component to receive the concentrated water slug when the pump starts. Shaft seal failure is already the most common pump repair in the industry. If any real world damage is occurring from skimmer tabs, it is most likely showing up here first — yet the industry never identifies the shaft seal as the primary risk.

High Risk — Pump Impeller and O-Rings

The impeller is the first component the concentrated water contacts after entering the pump. Rubber o-rings and gaskets in the pump degrade from chlorine exposure faster than any other pump component. These are already routine maintenance items.

Low Risk — Heater

Despite being the primary focus of industry warnings, the heater actually faces the least risk from skimmer tabs specifically because it sits downstream of 50 to 100 gallons of filter volume that dilutes the concentrated water before it arrives. Heater failures are common and costly, but the evidence suggests they are far more likely to result from chronic water chemistry imbalances — low pH, high calcium hardness, galvanic corrosion — or from chlorinator backflow than from the diluted water that reaches the heater after passing through the filter.

No Meaningful Risk — PVC Plumbing

Based on peer reviewed materials science, PVC pipe at any realistic pool chlorine concentration shows essentially no meaningful degradation. The pipes themselves are not at risk from skimmer tabs at any concentration level likely to be encountered in a residential pool system.

Section 7: When the Warning Is Actually Valid

None of this analysis suggests that putting chlorine tabs in the skimmer is universally risk-free. The actual evidence supports a much more specific and honest warning:

- Pump running 24/7: Tabs in the skimmer are largely safe. Constant flow prevents dangerous concentration buildup and the pump faces minimal concentrated exposure.
- Pump on a timer — most residential pools: Genuine but limited risk exists. The pump shaft seal and impeller face the most significant exposure at startup. The heater does not face meaningful risk from this scenario.
- Extended pump shutdown — vacation, power outage: Highest risk scenario. Prolonged dissolution in isolated pipe volume creates the most aggressive conditions. The pump is the primary component at risk.
- New plaster pools: Avoid trichlor tabs near any plumbing for the first several weeks while plaster cures.
- Vinyl liner pools: Bleaching of liner material around the skimmer opening is a well documented cosmetic risk — one of the few genuinely supported specific claims in this debate.

The correct industry advice should be: do not put tabs in the skimmer if your pump runs on a timer, and be aware that your pump shaft seal faces the primary exposure risk

when the pump restarts. The blanket 'never put tabs in the skimmer' rule, citing heater damage as the primary concern, is not supported by the available evidence.

Section 8: Why the Industry Gets This Wrong

Financial Incentives Throughout the Supply Chain

Every party warning against skimmer tabs has a financial interest in selling an alternative — floaters, inline chlorinators, automatic chemical dosing systems. The warning has been so consistently repeated across commercially interested parties that it has achieved the status of established fact without anyone applying systematic analytical scrutiny to the underlying claims.

Manufacturer Warranty Language as a Denial Tool

Pool equipment manufacturers use broad warranty language covering 'chemical damage' and 'failure to maintain proper water chemistry' to deny claims without having to prove specifically what caused the failure. Pentair and Hayward have never published specific engineering data identifying skimmer tabs as a failure mechanism — yet their warranty language is broad enough to cite any chemical issue as grounds for denial. Meanwhile, as Pentair's own chlorinator documentation reveals, their recommended alternative product is also a documented source of corrosive chemical exposure to equipment.

Conflating Causes of Heater Failure

Pool heater failures are genuinely common and genuinely related to water chemistry. But the chemistry issues that most consistently damage heaters — chronic low pH, high calcium hardness, aggressive water, galvanic corrosion from dissimilar metals — are ongoing whole-pool conditions, not the diluted pulse of water from skimmer tabs that arrives at the heater after passing through 50 to 100 gallons of filter volume. The industry correctly identifies water chemistry as a cause of heater failure but incorrectly points to skimmer tabs as the specific mechanism.

The Inline Chlorinator Blind Spot

The industry's enthusiastic promotion of inline chlorinators as the safe alternative has created a remarkable blind spot: Pentair's own documentation admits their chlorinator produces corrosive backflow of liquid and gas, makes the protective check valve optional, and yet the industry continues recommending chlorinators as safer than skimmer tabs while collecting warranty denials citing chemical damage. This contradiction has gone largely unexamined in pool industry literature.

The Absence of Actual Engineering Research

No controlled study has been published specifically measuring equipment damage from residential chlorine tabs placed in a skimmer under real world conditions. The only peer reviewed documented case of pump-off chemical concentration causing damage involved a commercial chemical controller malfunction dispensing industrial quantities of sodium hypochlorite and muriatic acid — not a residential trichlor tab in a homeowner's skimmer basket. The warning is built on theoretical chemistry reasoning and commercially motivated repetition, not engineering data.

Conclusion: A More Honest Standard of Care

The chlorine tab in the skimmer debate illustrates a broader problem in the pool service industry: the tendency to repeat commercially motivated conventional wisdom as established engineering fact without applying the analytical rigor that the underlying chemistry and physics actually allow.

The evidence, when examined carefully, supports the following conclusions:

- The concentrated pH risk from skimmer tabs is real but limited to the skimmer pipe and pump components — the heater is not meaningfully at risk due to filter dilution
- PVC plumbing faces no meaningful risk from chlorine at any realistic pool concentration — peer reviewed science supports this clearly
- Inline chlorinators without properly installed and maintained Viton check valves pose a greater and more direct risk to the heater than skimmer tabs — Pentair's own documentation confirms this
- Check valve degradation over time creates a progressive and largely invisible risk that delivers increasing doses of concentrated chlorine directly to the heater with no warning signs
- The blanket 'never' warning is not supported by engineering evidence — the risk is conditional and primarily depends on pump run time and which specific component is being considered
- No peer reviewed controlled study has documented actual equipment damage specifically caused by residential skimmer tabs under real world conditions
- Some chlorine tablet manufacturers explicitly approve skimmer placement on their product labels
- Every party warning against skimmer tabs has a direct financial interest in selling an alternative product
- Pentair openly acknowledges their own chlorinator creates corrosive backflow risk while making the protective check valve optional — a contradiction that has gone largely unexamined

A more honest and defensible standard of care for pool professionals would be: understand where the actual risk lies based on chemistry and dilution physics,

communicate that risk accurately to clients based on their specific pump run time configuration, inspect inline chlorinator check valves at every service visit as a critical maintenance item, and evaluate each situation on its specific conditions rather than repeating a blanket rule that the evidence does not fully support.

That is what genuine pool expertise looks like.

About the Author

Rex Bowden is a pool service professional serving the Baton Rouge, Louisiana area. This analysis was developed through systematic application of chemistry principles, fluid dynamics, dilution mathematics, and review of publicly available manufacturer technical documentation.

Contact: (225) 276-8115 | rexkfp@gmail.com | @rexpools