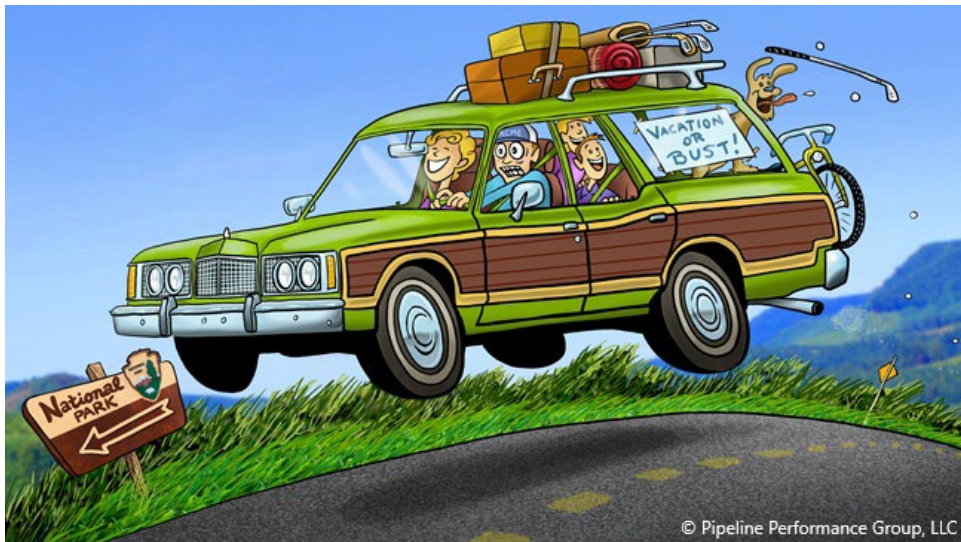


Driving Towards Disaster

Summer is the season of the long-haul family getaway. We pack the cooler, strap the bikes to the rack, and hang signs with "Vacation or Bust" on the window, all fueled by the excitement of a week away from the clock. But for pipeliners who work shift rotations, the drive to the destination can be the most dangerous part of the trip.

Fatigue is more than just feeling "sleepy". It is a physiological state of impairment that can mirror the effects of alcohol. For a shiftworker finishing a final night rotation, the body's need for sleep peaks just as the family is ready to depart. Ignoring the signals of fatigue to get a head start on the drive can leave them in a state of cognitive debt.

Being awake for 18 hours can impair cognitive function similarly to having a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.05%. After 24 hours of wakefulness, impairment levels can reach a BAC of 0.10%, well above the legal limit for driving under the influence.



The highway environment creates a perfect storm for a fatigued brain. Long, straight stretches of road and the repetitive hum of tires contribute to a sensory-deprived atmosphere that can trigger highway hypnosis. For a tired driver, this can lead to microsleeps, brief, involuntary moments of sleep lasting from a fraction of a second up to 30 seconds. At highway speeds of 70 mph, your vehicle covers approximately 103 feet every second. A brief four-second microsleep means you have traveled more than the length of a football field while essentially unconscious! In that time, a car can drift across three lanes of traffic, or even off the road entirely.

To make matters worse, the summer elements don't help this dangerous scenario. High temperatures and the glare of the afternoon sun can cause significant eye strain and physical lethargy. For a shiftworker whose circadian rhythm is already disrupted, these environmental factors can act as a sedative, making the struggle to stay awake an ever greater challenge.

When scheduling that week of rest, relaxation, and fun, keep in mind that preparation can help alleviate some fatigue risks. To ensure your vacation doesn't end before it begins, consider these fatigue countermeasures:

- **The 24-Hour Buffer:** Never start a long-distance drive immediately after a shift. Schedule your departure for the morning after you have had at least one full, uninterrupted night of restorative sleep.
- **The Power Nap:** During the drive, if you feel your concentration slipping or find yourself blinking slowly, pull over immediately. A 20-minute nap in a safe location can provide a temporary boost in alertness, though it is not a long-term fix.
- **Hydration and Light Meals:** Avoid heavy, carb-rich meals before or during a drive, which can induce "food coma" sleepiness. Stick to high-protein snacks and plenty of water.

That "Vacation or Bust" sign should be a promise of fun, not a premonition. Drowsy driving is a preventable tragedy that claims thousands of lives every year. This summer, respect your body's need for rest as much as you respect the systems and equipment you operate. Your family's safety depends on a driver who is fully present and fully alert.